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Voluntary simplicity: an enacted reality

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Voluntary simplicity: An enacted reality

By

Timothy John Mullaney

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Graduate College

To Harvey Joanning, who showed me how to nurture warm ideas.

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary Simplicity is a term reflecting the attempt to live life more deliberately, in accordance with one's values. The following study examines voluntary simplicity as it is lived in social contexts.

Following a historical review of simplicity in Chapter One, Chapter Two presents epistemological assumptions that undergird the research design that follows in chapter Three. It recognizes two major ways of knowing voluntary simplicity: (1) through comparing statements that different members of a family make and (2) through comparisons of statements that individuals make. The latter approach divides into noetic statements, or constituting acts, and noematic statements, or constituted content. Roughly, noesis indicates the active aspect of knowing, while noema indicates its passive aspects. In this study, the two will be treated as reciprocals.

Chapters Three and Four present the research design and data, respectively. There were nine interviews of families, couples, one individual, and members of a Simplicity Study Circle. Excepting the study circle members, all interviewees expressed significant identification with voluntary simplicity. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes of three orders: (1) Individual enaction, (2) interactional generation, (or how simplicity is generated through interaction), and (3) observer effects, or a best estimate of how the interviewer's presence affected the interview. The data were analyzed for category clusters and domains.

A combined data analysis presents a third-order view of voluntary simplicity. Data are organized into the major categories, "Social context" and "Participation in Social Context." Social context consisted of the headings, "Material and Time

Conservation," "Values/Reflections," (including environmental and social ethics, creativity and agency, community, and spirituality), and "Struggles." The section, "Participation in Social Context," establishes that the "committed" informants are either extensively engaged in community- and/or relationship-building activities (or, in one couple's case that busyness, regretfully, prevented it).

Chapter Five presents a discussion of the data. It covers: (1) An epistemological framework that guided the analysis, (2) a discussion of "internalization," reflecting the "enaction" theory of cognition advanced by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), (3) the relevance of simplicity in therapy, (4) limitations and future studies and (5) commentary on being a participant-observer.

CHAPTER ONE: VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Introduction

Definition

This document will focus on questions related to the practice of voluntary simplicity. Voluntary simplicity is an old idea with many historical reworkings. Many movements have espoused the idea. Few of them have endured the test of time, but the idea itself has been perennial. Duane Elgin's book, Voluntary simplicity (1993/1981) is a frequently cited contemporary statement of this philosophy. Elgin quotes Richard Gregg, a student of Gandhi's, to define the term:

> Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity, and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. Of course, as different people have different purposes in life, what is relevant to the purpose of one person might not be relevant to the purpose of another... The degree of simplification is a matter for each individual to settle for himself. (pp. 23-24)

Living voluntarily implies "...more deliberately, intentionally, and purposefully – in short, it is to live more consciously... To live more simply is to live more purposefully and with a minimum of needless distraction... Voluntary simplicity (is) a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich..." (Elgin, pp. 24-25).

Elgin's definition has multiple facets. The key factor is conscious purpose. Many social categories surprise the people they are said to describe. Many yuppies from the 1980's were unaware that they were serving to constitute a business niche by adopting consumer values. Many believed that they alone were discovering materialistic pleasures.

This would not be the case with voluntary simplicity. Those who embrace it are aware that they are doing so and can articulate the premises of their orientation.

Another important part of Elgin's definition revolves around the elimination of needless distraction. Having decided on a purpose in living, one seeks to minimize or remove factors that interfere with that purpose.

Voluntary simplicity is not poverty. Involuntary poverty, according to Elgin (p.27) "...generates a sense of helplessness, passivity, and despair, whereas purposeful simplicity fosters a sense of personal empowerment, creative engagement, and opportunity." He calls it a kind of "golden mean -- a creative and aesthetic balance between poverty and excess" (p.28).

Voluntary simplicity is not a back to the land movement either. Urban proponents can be as simplicity-oriented as their rural counterparts (Elgin, p.28). Perhaps a concern voiced by some proponents with the ecological damage caused by overconsumption has led to the impression that this is a back to the land movement. Elgin proposes that this is a "...'make the most of wherever you are' movement" (p. 28).

Another possible misinterpretation of voluntary simplicity is that it opposes economic progress. Elgin alternatively suggests that it involves a new direction, predicated on past progress, a direction focused on utilizing material comfort to pursue the nonmaterial dimensions of life, such as cultural and spiritual progress, community, and democracy.

A definition of simplicity for this time does not involve hostility toward beauty and the arts. The aesthetic standard tends toward the beauty expressed by the elimination of the unnecessary (Elgin, quoting Picasso 1981/1993). Thus, spareness and organic unity

are frequently treasured in art's imitation of life. Picasso and Frank Lloyd Wright tend to get more admiration than more embellished forms of art.

Simplicity is not about denial either. Elgin again turns to Gregg as he quotes Gandhi:

> As long as you derive inner help and comfort from anything, you should keep it. If you were to give it up in a mood of self-sacrifice or out of a stern sense of duty, you would continue to want it back, and that unsatisfied want would make trouble for you. Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you. (p. 32)

Thus, simplicity can be seen once again in terms of the conscious purpose of the practitioner focused on something to be gained and not on something to be sacrificed.

Expressions of Simplicity

- Using freed up time to spend more time with loved ones doing things that one values with them
- Pursuing mastery in the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, or artistic domains (not exclusive to these domains)
- Focus on ecological well-being
- Sense of compassion for the poor. Concern for greater social justice
- Tend to lower personal consumption
- Consider ecological impacts when purchasing
- Tend toward a natural, healthy and simple diet
- Tend to reduce physical clutter by giving unnecessary possessions away, selling things, etc.
- Considering the politics of a given purchase when a company's policies or a country's policies are unethical

- Frequently recycle materials to minimize ecological destruction
- Considers the usefulness of one's livelihood to the greater good. Chooses livelihood in terms of fulfillment
- Tending to develop skills that enhance self-reliance. Less use of experts
- Egalitarian role relationships
- Tend to seek holistic health-care
- Tend to get involved with compassionate causes, such as ecological issues, using non-violent methods
- Often favor environmentally friendly modes of transportation. (Elgin, 1993, pp.32-35)

Integration of Inner and Outer Aspects of Existence

Elgin notes that an ecological approach to living entails maintaining ourselves and surpassing ourselves. Maintaining ourselves involves the material basis of living, such as food, shelter, clothing, and medical care, etc. Surpassing ourselves involves the search for meaning. If we neglect either dimension we suffer. If we pursue material maintenance at the expense of meaning, we merely survive. If we pursue meaning at the expense of our material maintenance, we might not even survive. Voluntary simplicity requires the integration of both dimensions of living.

Elgin further stresses that voluntary simplicity is more than a life style, or fad. It is a way of life. It represents a complex and sophisticated response to living in a deteriorating industrial civilization. The deterioration is indicated by the lack of ecological sustainability. The movement is a part of a shift to a post-industrial society.

There are both pushes of necessity and pulls of opportunity in the voluntary simplicity movement. The pushes come from several directions. The human population is growing at an explosive rate, posing enormous ecological threats. The gap between rich and poor nations is growing wider rapidly. Over 1.2 billion people now live in abject poverty, below any standard of human decency. Global warming will alter patterns of rainfall, disrupting food production, causing flooding, displacement of large groups of people, and emergence of new diseases, along with a redistribution of known diseases. Ecosystems will be destroyed through the destruction of tropical rainforests, and potentially valuable pharmaceuticals will be lost through reduction of botanicals. The world oil supply is disappearing rapidly. Toxic wastes are polluting our air and water, with the potential for massive outbreaks of cancer and genetic damage. Water pollution has caused a leveling off of the world's fish catch, even as world demand is rapidly growing. The ozone layer is getting depleted with expected increases in skin cancer and cataracts. Acid rain is destroying forests, farms and streams.

These problems, Elgin explains, are interrelated. They require new approaches to living in order to live sustainably. This requires efficiency, i.e., not squandering precious resources. Efficiency requires living peacefully, as war is a tremendous diversion of these resources. Living peacefully requires living fairly, or learning the meaning of "enough," so that there will be more left over for others to share with us.

The pull of opportunity, mentioned by Elgin earlier, is the potential of simple living to provide a peaceful and fulfilled life. The majority of people do not find this through their employment, and the activities that might lead to more meaning usually do not provide a livelihood.

Voluntary Simplicity in the United States

David Shi (1985) wrote a history of the voluntary simplicity movement in the U.S. called The simple life. His readers would make some rapid conclusions after reading this book. One would be that voluntary simplicity movements are ephemeral, with none appearing to last. The other would be that voluntary simplicity is an idea that refuses to die. Some other group or ideology always appeared even as other movements were waning. The ideas in this section reflect Shi's account.

Europeans came here with aspirations for material wealth and closeness to God, sometimes in the same movements. Puritans lead prescriptively simple lives while also embodying Calvinistic notions of predestination (Weber, 1958). Wealth became emblematic of a favored spiritual status, but conspicuous consumption was quite the opposite. Quakers settled in the United States to pursue closeness to God with special stress on simplicity as a means of doing so.

Politics constituted another basis for simplicity, as Republicans in the Revolutionary War era chose to wear their clothing until it fell off their backs before buying British textiles. Post-Revolutionary War Republicans decried the rampant materialism emerging, arguing that simplicity was essential to the success of a democracy. Simplicity would permit individuals the time to study the issues of the time, thus becoming informed citizens and responsible voters.

During the nineteenth century, housewives were frequently the standard bearers for the value of simplicity. After men assumed their duties as providers, women were seen as less corrupted by the market place and mothers assumed the burden of instilling the virtues of simplicity in the next generation. This phenomenon coincided with the

growing urbanization of the country. Fathers frequently had to be at work for 10-12 hours a day, leaving little time to assume the patriarchal role the men in earlier generations had assumed.

New England transcendentalism was another important movement of the nineteenth century. It was a progressive movement, exemplified by thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. It stressed the pleasures of the intellect when the baser instincts are controlled, thus Emerson's call for plain living and high thinking.

The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of patrician intellectuals who were the self-appointed moral spokesmen and teachers of a generation. They combined wealth, culture, and material restraint, criticizing the *nouveaux riche* for their conspicuous consumption and lack of culture. This group was also frequently critical of the lower classes for their failure to pursue the life of the mind, albeit many sympathized with the lower classes in the context of class antagonisms between the newly rich industrialists and the proletariat. William and Henry James, William Dean Howells and Oliver Wendell Holmes exemplified this movement.

Turn of the century progressivism ushered in new types of simplicity. Jeffersonian Republicanism and Christian social ethics combined to define new expression of simplicity. Social reform, back to the land movements (including the Boy Scouts), arts and crafts revival, frugality, and reduction of material clutter were all aspects of this predominantly middle class phenomenon. Edward Bok, editor of the Ladies Home Journal, promoted the virtues of simplicity through the large audience of middle class women who read the journal. Social reformers such as Jane Addams sought to promote dialogue across social classes, to the benefit of both the patrician Hull House staff and the

impoverished individuals who came there. A refined simplicity characterized Addam's view of the simple life. The naturalists, John Muir and John Burroughs, came to prominence during this period.

The advent of World War I brought a patriotic type of simplicity, as people cut back on their consumption to support the war effort. Many thought that the war might inspire a moral rejuvenation of the American character. The aftermath of the war saw an explosion of materialism, however. The advertising industry became a powerful factor in the public consciousness. The manufacture of needs became a product alongside other commodities during the 1920's. A group of southern intellectuals called the Nashville Agrarians, centered at Vanderbilt University, romanticized the old south in contrast to the rampant materialism of that time. Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Owsley, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle and others constituted this group. Their critique of encroaching materialism was well received, in contrast to the overly romantic image of the southern farmer. Ralph Borsodi, a New York social critic, attained prominence during this period for advocating family homesteading. Lewis Mumford represented urban simplicity through his critique of 1920's materialism, and his career as a social planner.

The Great Depression forced the issue of simplicity for many. Franklin Roosevelt saw the depression as an opportunity to restore Jeffersonian simplicity across the nation. He spoke of public responsibility, simplicity, and spiritual values. He criticized self-seeking and materialism. The Civilian Conservation Corps and federal homesteading were part of a campaign to relocate urbanites in rural settings, where they would abide in

Jeffersonian simplicity. There was continued interest in decentralization represented by Borsodi, Mumford, the Nashville Agrarians, and others.

The Second World War interrupted much of the momentum of the New Deal and the decentralists. The war stimulated a great deal of frugality in the interest of helping the armed forces. Predictably, the end of the war brought an enormous explosion of consumption.

The American standard of living went up dramatically after the war. The manufacture of needs, i.e., advertising, resumed the momentum it lost during the Great Depression. Many saw consumption as patriotic for the boost it gave to the economy. As in previous times, there were critics of the consumer life style. Mumford continued his critique of American society. Erich Fromm, J.D. Salinger, Edward Albee, and others explored the emptiness of an uncritical involvement with material acquisition. The Beat generation and the hippie counterculture emerged as simplicity movements, but failed to provide a compelling alternative to the majority of Americans. Charles Reich and Theodore Roszak envisioned a new consciousness that would heal the alienation spawned by the excesses of their generation. This consciousness required a simpler way before it could emerge. The writings of Borsodi received a new audience, as did the writings of Helen and Scott Nearing. The Nearings were homesteaders in Vermont, and later, Maine. Many sought simplicity in communal living. Critics of the counterculture movement found it too hedonistic and lacking in moral discipline.

The hippie movement declined as the baby boomers matured. Concern for ecology became a new ideology for simplicity in the 1970's. Many questioned the received view that large-scale economies are necessarily for the best. The Arab oil

embargo in 1973 raised public awareness of the finitude of natural resources. The energy crisis inspired those who already advocated a return to simpler living. Wendell Berry advocated a Jeffersonian model of simplicity attuned to the limited resources of our planet. This model entailed a more decentralized, rural economy based on necessities. E.F. Schumacher's Small is beautiful (1975) belongs to this time and was among the most influential books in the simplicity genre. At the heart of Schumacher's writing was the idea that people could best meet their spiritual needs by scaling down their social structures and maximizing their well being with a minimum of consumption. President Carter embraced the main points of Small is beautiful. Other noteworthy publications included Mother earth news, Whole earth catalogue, and Organic gardening. There was notable diminution of 1970's ecological simplicity as the Reagan era began.

Voluntary Simplicity Today

Voluntary simplicity is once again becoming trendy. Television and radio talk shows frequently have guests who advocate for voluntary simplicity. Recent popular publications about the subject abound. Dominguez & Robins Your money or your life (1992) has attracted a great deal of popular attention in terms of sales, participation in simplicity circles focused on the book, and media coverage. The book presents a nine-step program for clarifying one's relationship with money and consumption culminating in financial independence for some of its followers. Elgin's Voluntary simplicity has been revised (1993). Amy Dacyczyn has achieved fame as the publisher of The tightwad gazette and its collection of articles in book form (1992, 1995, and 1997). Cecile Andrews' The circle of simplicity (1997) is another frequently used text in simplicity circles. Sue Bender (1989) published Plain and simple to describe the experience of

living with the Amish. Jacqueline Blix and David Heitmiller recently published Getting a life, describing their own and others' experience in working the nine-step program of Dominguez & Robin (1992). Andy Dappen wrote Cheap tricks (1992), appealing to the growing audience for lessons in frugal living. Janet Luhrs publishes the Simple living journal and the Guide to simple living.

Gerald Celente (1997) of the New Trends Institute predicts that voluntary simplicity is here to stay for many years. Celente notes that corporate downsizing (or "dumbsizing," as he likes to put it) will continue to place workers in a financially compromised position without expectation of getting another job with equal pay. The many corporate mergers would produce many niche markets that the newly unemployed would fill as consultants based in their homes. Others may choose to start their own small businesses. The most important part regarding voluntary simplicity is that many more people will discover that they like the freedom of not having to report to work and will choose to live more frugally out of necessity and to further enjoy their severance from the job. Old-fashioned frugality will have a renaissance. Retiring Americans, as a whole will not have saved enough to support the lifestyle they were accustomed to when they were younger. A $50,000 a year lifestyle would require somewhere near $1,000,000 in savings, as Baby Boomers save 38 percent of what they need to attain that goal. According to a 1993 Merrill Lynch survey half of all Americans had less than $1,000 in financial assets, the savings rate was around 4 percent, two thirds of all Americans in the private sector had no pension plans, and half of all Americans had no retirement plans.

CHAPTER TWO: ON KNOWING

Introduction

Gregory Bateson (1972,1979) criticized the social sciences for failing to adequately examine the premises behind its procedures. How do we pre-understand phenomena? What unexamined suppositions generate what we term understanding? For example, many tacitly and consensually accept the premise that there is a world that exists independently of our senses and that this world constitutes the ultimate reality (physicalism). Another premise might be that this world causes sensory experience and that we can know that world (realism). Such beliefs determine the nature of our knowing by generating categories that will frame the methods and fruits of scientific endeavor. In fact, these premises may determine the fruits themselves.

Aristotle proposed multiple senses of the word "cause." One of these senses is the efficient cause of a thing. The efficient cause transfers some aspect of its nature to the effect. Effects followed their causes with a necessity that modeled logic. We tend to assume that causes will be linear in nature, with one cause having one effect. Another sense of cause, the final cause, reflects the view that things have destinies that account for their behavior. Thus, some speculate on, for example, what we are evolving toward, as if the future could change the past.

As a generality we believe in the separation of mind and body with mind existing as "...the ghost in the machine." The mind seeks to know the world/machine by conforming to its shape. We come to know that world through the senses and their prostheses (instruments of science), and through the exercise of reason. In recent thought,

the application of *modus tollens,* or use of falsifying instances, to test theory has become the central operation of the scientific intellect.

A particularly significant premise that family therapists have questioned is the idea that the presence of the social scientist has no impact on what is observed. The next two sections will explore this premise.

Bateson and Epistemology

Bateson (1972,1979) frequently criticized the social sciences on grounds of epistemology. Epistemology, for Bateson, had a somewhat different usage from the traditional philosophical field of the same name. Philosophers understand epistemology as the study of knowledge itself, attempting to describe the nature of knowledge, its limits, etc. Bateson appeared to use the term in a more psychological sense, as a set of perceptual premises, usually unnoticed, that give rise to our system of categories. These premises account for both what we know, think and decide, and how we know, think, and decide. His use of the word resembled what Kuhn (1962) called paradigm.

Bateson proposed that the premises that give rise to inquiry in the physical sciences are inappropriate for the social sciences. One colorful statement he made to illustrate the distinction is that kicking a stone is different from kicking a dog. The scientist seeking understanding of the stone can resort to the field of kinetics and proceed from there. The behavior of the dog will be much more complex, however. Kicking the dog cannot be understood in terms of kinetics because the kicking can best be understood in terms of information. The kicking communicates a message to the dog. This message will contain information about the specific situation and about the kicker's relationship to the dog in general. Similarly, the dog's behavior subsequent to the attack will

communicate information back to its aggressor about the dog's situation at that moment and about the dog's relationship to the aggressor in general.

The first situation described by Bateson belongs to a domain that Bateson called *pleroma*. The pleroma, a term borrowed from Carl Jung, is the domain that cannot draw distinctions. The *creatura* is the domain that draws distinctions. The creatura requires conscious living organisms to constitute its process. As such, the energy of its process is drawn from metabolism. Whereas the behavior of the kicked stone is a function of the force of the kick, the behavior of the dog (triggered by information) is not contingent on force. As mentioned above, the information conveyed by the aggressor, coupled with energy from the respective metabolisms of the participants, is more relevant to the process. Depending on the past history of the kicker and the dog, making the gesture of a kick could produce even more dramatic results than an actual kick. Another noteworthy aspect of social systems is that information does not have to be an event. Not kicking the dog could provoke a response in some future situation. Or, getting beyond Bateson's aggressive metaphor, phone calls that don't come can produce dramatic results, as can whispered messages, or tax returns that are not filed.

The Mind

Bateson's notion of mind included the mentation of conscious individuals but went beyond the boundaries of individuality as well. Bateson would have been comfortable (epistemologically) describing the recent discoveries of widespread frog mutations and deaths as signs of ecological "madness," for example.

Bateson (1979) describes mind first as an aggregate of interacting parts. This allows for the ecological example in the last paragraph. It also challenges entrenched

notions about the ego. Ego and consciousness have no place in this definition in the sense that normally accompanies these words. Bateson has not provided for a monadology in his definition. If the term denotes a mentality in Bateson's view, it must be divisible into components.

A second aspect of Bateson's definition of mind is that the interaction between parts of mind is triggered by difference. Difference means information, and exists outside of time and space. The dog's behavior reflects a difference between itself and the attacking human. The human's behavior reflects a difference between himself and the dog. Subsequent elements in their interactive sequence will further elaborate difference. Differences in the frequency of nerve impulses communicate information in the nervous system. Changes in temperature trigger the functions of a thermostat.

The third aspect of the mind is that it requires collateral energy. Referring again to our unfortunate dog, energy is not applied from outside the social system that includes the two participants. Energy here means that the dog and the human ate breakfast that morning, and thus have functioning metabolisms. This point connects with the last point, as information triggers interaction via the collateral energy within the system.

The fourth aspect of mind is that mental process requires circular (or more complex) chains of determination. This is a monumental leap from the Aristotelian efficient cause discussed above. Cause was believed to be unidirectional. Bateson substitutes an effect-effect model for the cause-effect model that we have embraced for millennia. The effect eventually determines the cause. Does the husband withdraw from his wife because she nags or does the wife pursue her husband because he withdraws?

Circular models characterize physiological processes, servomechanisms, ecosystems, and arguments.

Bateson's fifth aspect of the definition of mind is that interactions encode interactions that preceded them. Interactions bear the imprint of other interactions, presenting a type of map of the system in which the interaction occurs. Therapists learn to use this notion to hypothesize and intervene in family problems. As a therapist in the St. Louis County Juvenile Court, for example, I learned to analyze families with a child who runs away in terms of rejecting messages from elsewhere in the family. Thus, running away might indicate to the therapist that the parent(s) try to focus on communicating inclusion in the family.

The sixth and final aspect of mind is that the description and classification of the processes of encoding discloses a hierarchy of logical types immanent in the phenomena. The runaway child in the previous example can be understood in terms of internal ecology, noting the anger and alienation that follows from her thought processes. Moving up to a higher order of analysis, the child's interactions with her mother could be observed to be conflictual. Emerging at this level of analysis one might find that mother and child both perceive that their unspoken contract has been broken in some way and running away is some kind of answer to the sense of violation. At the next level of analysis, one might find that mother's new boyfriend is conflicting with daughter. Mother is consistently siding with the new boyfriend against her daughter. We learn that mother and daughter were previously very close. Running away could be seen in terms of politics. It redefines an ongoing power struggle in the family. Here, three-party interaction allows for a new emergent, alliance, which is impossible with fewer

participants. Levels of abstraction can be applied indefinitely, depending on one's reasons for seeking an understanding.

Family therapists have utilized the insight of point six to focus on emergent themes that are understood by the therapist through comparisons of multiple points of view expressed by various participants in the problem (family members, school teachers, juvenile officers, other therapists, clergy, etc.). The more points of view expressed through description, interaction, etc., the higher the order of understanding can emerge (Keeney, 1982). Comparisons of multiple descriptions yield significant insights in contexts beyond the therapeutic domain. Embedded in any one person's description of a phenomenon such as voluntary simplicity is important information about that person's relationship to other key individuals in his or her social network, and especially the family. This would be an important factor for the researcher's consideration, as a careful analysis of the words and behaviors of informants will yield these emergent themes relational themes.

The Observer

Bateson's analysis of mind also illustrates an alternative epistemology. Bateson meant to generate new perceptions and categories by publishing this view. He hoped that it would make us wiser by providing a framework for understanding that we reap what we sow, whether this is in human interactions or in environmental stewardship. He described his sense of personal responsibility for calling attention to the terrifying ecological crisis that follows from having an advanced technology and a primitive epistemology. He worried that his writings would be an instance of too little, too late.

In the realm of therapy he was concerned that therapists rush in to intervene without grasping the rich ecologies that problems manifest. In this and similar contexts he often invoked the saying, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." If we fail to understand the reciprocal nature of systemic interaction, our efforts to help, though well intentioned, are likely to help maintain the problem at best. Bateson's work prescribes an ethic of observing systems (Keeney, 1982). The way we observe cannot be neutral in nature. Even the attempt to apply Bateson's thought can be hazardous. For example, describing interaction in a family as dysfunctional has broader systemic consequences. A parent, feeling blamed, could respond by scapegoating the child, one spouse might blame the other spouse, a protective services worker might use this information to justify a delay in returning a child to that family, and so forth.

Traditionally, though, family therapists, more often than others, have called attention to the phenomenon of iatrogenic illness. As a prophylactic for this possibility family therapists pay careful attention to their role as a social mirror for their clients. In general terms, the therapist joins the family system in a spirit of respect for the richness of their unique integrity. The therapist strives to present in a genuine and empathic way, consistent with Buber's I-thou attitude (Buber, 1970). Bateson (1979) noted that when we treat others like things they are more likely to behave thingishly.

This concern with the role of the observer in the process of social systems (or cybernetics) introduces an additional order of analysis to Bateson's epistemology. The first order of analysis is the worldview prescribed by cybernetic epistemology. Being well trained in this view, one looks for the systemic relationships in any given social phenomenon, and one assumes that those relationships are implicit in the phenomenon.

Second-order cybernetics is concerned with the consequences of looking at phenomena in a given way. Any system that includes an observer is open to this level of analysis.

An interest in the properties of observers followed from this insight. Keeney (1982) drew the attention of family therapists to cognitive biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, for their contributions to our understanding of reality as actively constructed. Their work gave compelling empirical support for Kantian epistemology. Immanuel Kant (1966, 1950) argued that minds do not conform themselves to the shape of a reality waiting to be assimilated. Rather, minds shape reality into the form of the mind itself. For Kant, categories like space, time, and causality inevitably characterize what we call real because our minds structure reality into such categories. Maturana and Varela, among others, demonstrated empirically that organisms' realities are structurally determined, i.e., that reality reflects biological structure for a given organism, in a way similar to Kant's description.

Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) illustrate this view with the example of color. Humans have three nerve tracts responsible for color perception. The first of these constructs a color as red or green, the second constructs blue or yellow, and the third constructs gray tones from white to black. In order to perceive color, one or more of the first two must be active, with the third determining the brightness or darkness of the color. Each nerve tract is exclusive. The red/green tract can construct red or green but not both at once. The blue/yellow tract can construct the experience of blue or yellow but not blue and yellow together (This combination meaningfully appears as green, however, due to the red/green tract responding to this combination. The same is not true for the combination of red and green, however, as the blue/yellow tract does not activate in a

reciprocal way.). Complex colors, such as mauve, or chartreuse, are perceived when combinations of all three tracts are activated. Children and individuals from many cultures learn these colors more slowly than the colors belonging to only one of the aforementioned tracts.

Because humans normally have three active color tracts, they are called trichromats. Dogs have two such tracts, making them dichromats. Due to logical typing, humans perceive orders of color that dogs cannot. Similarly some insect species are believed to have five color tracts. These pentachromats would perceive orders of color that we humans cannot imagine. Varela et al. would compare it to seeing "fast red," i.e. colors with emergent qualities beyond human experience.

The key point to note is that we can best understand color perception in terms of a relationship between the retina and the brain rather than comparing the retina with the external object believed to account for the experience of color. The discussion of color is intended to illustrate the idea that reality is structurally determined. Varela et al. (1991) refer to the inevitable recourse to biological structure in the study of cognition as embodiment, a term first used by Varela's former teacher, Warren McCulloch (1965).

Enacted Reality

Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) raise the analysis of cognition to a higher order of abstraction when they propose to approach the cognitive sciences assuming embodiment, and looking for the *enaction* of reality in self-validating loops. Restated, "reality" on one hand, and the appearance of an individual attempting to know it on the other, mutually specify one another. Restated again, knowing and experiencing are reciprocally linked.

In addition to the Kantian tradition mentioned above, the phenomenological movement and Franz Brentano provide intellectual background to this view (Spiegelberg, 1971). Brentano formulated the theory of intentionality noting that consciousness is always related to an object of consciousness. Husserl distinguished two dimensions of intentionality: (1) The noetic, or constitutive act, and (2) noematic, or constituted content, of cognition (Husserl, 1972).

Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) build on this tradition when they define cognition as perceptually guided action. Action indicates the noetic dimension. Perceptual guidance reflects the noematic. The specific manifestations of an individual's embodiment is determined by its history of structural coupling, or through many cycles of sensorimotor loops situated in a specific biological structure.

Enactionism and Family Therapy

The enacted reality proposed by Varela et al. (1991) suggests ways that family therapists and their clientele gain practical knowledge of their situation. The therapist can seek understanding of the constitutive practices undergirding the reality, "problem," expressed by members of the social network in which the problem is enacted. The therapist proposes other ways of thinking, behaving, emoting, etc., opening the possibility of exposing the constitutive practices of members of that network. The probability of a change in embodiment is enhanced by working with more than one person in the social context of the problem. One person might respond to the therapeutic process by changing behavior in a way that promotes both a change in embodiment and a recalibration of behavior in the broader network. Another possibility is that the enaction of some part of family therapy by multiple members might promote changes in embodiment for

individuals. Sometimes the therapeutic process contributes to change with only slight changes in the consciousness of members, with changes in the consciousness of members amplifying with a growing history of altered embodiment. The key factor in therapeutic change would be exposing the pain of clients as products of constitutive practices using respectful means.

The therapist is also subject to the same processes of perceptually guided action, but has a head start on the family in terms of a history of structural coupling in a training environment and later in a work environment. The therapist brings a conviction to the situation that problems are "made of something" and is curious to interview family members and others to understand the ways that problems are enacted. The situation is richly meaningful, with individuals manifesting hierarchies of perceptually guided actions, and social networks manifesting hierarchies of circular determination, with all aspects impinging on all others. This context naturally inspires the respect of the therapist, with unconscious aspects of the therapist's behavior having as much or more relevance to therapeutic change than the intended aspects of his or her behavior.

Bateson's thought challenged cultural assumptions about the individual by defining mind in terms of aggregates of interacting parts. The implication is that the ego is a mere appearance, generated by the activity of a type of committee. It also gave transpersonal dimensions to mind, as mind could be a married couple conversing, a corporation in the process of conducting its business, or the delicate biological exchanges in a rainforest. Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) have gone beyond Bateson in describing all appearances, whether of a Cartesian subject or of an objective environment, as generated by a single process. Even the committee members have no ontic status.

Epistemology and Voluntary Simplicity

The cybernetic perspective proposed by Bateson coupled with the enactionistic view proposed by Varela, Thompson and Rosch suggest complementary ways of knowing the phenomenon, voluntary simplicity. The cybernetic view suggests that one compare messages of participants in a social system (the family) in order to understand voluntary simplicity as a socially "enacted" phenomenon with multiple levels of emergence. Voluntary simplicity requires a significant commitment and predictably, will encode the relationships in a family in a profound way. The researcher would approach informants in a respectful and collaborative way in acknowledgement of the integrity of that system. The researcher also understands that, failing to respect the role of voluntary simplicity in the structure of the family and in the family's relationship to its broader social context, his or her understanding of the phenomenon will be severely restricted.

Another dimension of inquiry would compare communications regarding the noetic and noematic aspects of voluntary simplicity for individuals. The goal of this type of research is to understand voluntary simplicity as an enacted, i.e., self-validating, reality. In other words, individuals will describe dynamic, constitutive (noetic) aspects of voluntary simplicity that are reciprocally linked to descriptions of experience and meaning (noematic).

Examples of noetic inquiry would be thoughts about, and activities pertaining to, voluntary simplicity. These phenomena would fulfil the action aspect of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's definition of cognition as perceptually guided *action*. Noematic inquiry focuses on the experiential aspects of voluntary simplicity and is exemplified by

questions requesting descriptions of experience, i.e., phenomenology. The described experiences fulfill the requirement that cognition be *perceptually guided.*

A final way to know voluntary simplicity would be the comparison of individual enactions to their role in the social constitution of voluntary simplicity in the family network. How do enacted realities and the social constitution of those realities interact? The next chapter will be devoted to methods of knowing voluntary simplicity informed by this chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: ON KNOWING VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: METHODS

Introduction

This chapter presents research methodologies for understanding voluntary simplicity. There were two major approaches: (1) The use of ethnographic interviews with families, and (2) formation of a "simplicity circle," focused on examining one's relationship to consumption and other lifestyle questions relevant to the definition of voluntary simplicity. In addition to method, I will discuss criteria of rigor for my research.

Who Is the Researcher?

I became interested in voluntary simplicity for a number of reasons. Parenthood developed a new consciousness about money. My wife and I never had to struggle to make ends meet and we had to learn better money management to avoid using day care for our daughter (something we very much wanted to do). I was also very impressed with the volume of clients I was seeing as a marriage and family therapist where money and consumption were integral to their suffering. Only rarely was survival the issue. These were cases where discretionary spending was contributing to the problem. Depression was the usual complaint. The clients felt trapped in jobs they hated. They were in significant debt and would not seek other employment because their incomes would be diminished, or their benefits, etc.

Growing disenchantment with the emerging managed care scene contributed to my own career crisis in the early 1990's. I still greatly enjoyed being a therapist but

found it increasingly hard to practice quality therapy, as the caseloads grew ever higher, even as referrals in private practice became increasingly hard to get.

I have been a student of Tibetan Buddhism for over 20 years, and have often derived a liberating perspective on personal crises by making a retreat. In late winter, 1993, I made a solitary retreat in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. I rediscovered how little it could take to feel content. Living in this one-room cabin without electricity or running water life felt nonetheless complete. I understood what sages have said and written for millennia on just this subject.

After returning from this retreat, I read a review of Your money or your life by Dominguez and Robin (1992). The main idea of the book, that consumption has a curvilinear relationship to fulfillment, matched my dawning sense of insight on the same matter. The authors perceived a majority of Americans living beyond the optimal balance of earning and consumption, many of whom believe that even more spending would fill the void they are experiencing. They offered a nine-step program for examining this balance and achieving financial independence. A key aspect to this program was a regular examination of monthly income and expense records to determine which expenses are in alignment with one's values and/or are rewarding enough to justify the expenditure of energy on a job to earn these items.

This seemed to offer much to the many individuals and families I had met professionally. Potentially, such a program might offer a much higher level of contentment to those who were willing to commit to it. As a social trend, it seems to represent something much more profound than what usually gets media attention as the newest trend.

I was excited to begin my doctoral work at Iowa State University and especially excited about acquiring the research skills to study this phenomenon in a dispassionate way. The following sections develop my plan to do this.

Criteria of Rigor

This section establishes parallels to traditional criteria of rigor in quantitative studies. These criteria include truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

Truth Value

Truth value indicates the degree of verisimilitude between one's data and the phenomena of interest. In positivistic terms, it is called internal validity. In the context of this study, it is called *credibility* (Guba, 1981).

The current study addressed credibility through multiple means. The first is the use of peer debriefing, to subject observations to the verification of colleagues through the use of discussions and written material. The second is the use of multiple avenues of understanding, i.e., the ethnographic interviews and the participant observation methods. This permits triangulation, ensuring more credible conclusions. The third is the use of member checks throughout the study to submit one's observations to informants for verification (Guba, 1981).

Applicability

In positivistic inquiry, applicability is defined in terms of external validity, and indicates that one's findings generalize across contexts. In the current study, which is assumed to be context-sensitive, applicability is called *transferability*, indicating that findings can be generalized to comparable contexts.

Consistency

Consistency in positivistic inquiry reflects the degree to which the instrument of inquiry will yield the same data in repeated applications. Reliability is the term associated with consistency in this context. In context-sensitive inquiry consistency is termed *dependability*. The researcher is the instrument of inquiry in ethnographic research, and as such, will expectedly shift in multiple ways in response to emerging insights and observations. Dependability requires that the researcher be able to account for such shifts (Guba, 1981).

Neutrality

Neutrality is called objectivity in positivistic inquiry. Careful methodology is the key to achieving objectivity in this domain. The reality of voluntary simplicity will vary with the individuals and groups practicing it. Since the domain we are interested in is constituted by multiple realities, neutrality was addressed in terms of the *confirmability* of the data.

Ethnographic Interviewing

Informants

The practice of voluntary simplicity has varied through different cultures and historical contexts, but those who practice it can, by definition, acknowledge it by virtue of the conscious intent implied by the term. As discussed in chapter one, many young professionals in the 1980's were surprised to learn that their lifestyles fit into one of Madison Avenue's categories. The Yuppie was conceptualized from the outside to define a market that could then be exploited. The Yuppies themselves gravitated toward the lifestyle in ways that were, at best, only partially conscious.

Thus, one criterion for selecting informants is that the potential informant be able to recognize his or her inclusion in this way of life, with the conscious intention of continued simplification over time. Deliberation is an essential feature of the definition of the term, and concomitantly must entail consciousness of voluntary simplicity as a means to an end. A practitioner of voluntary simplicity, similarly, is able to define some vision or goal (i.e., use of freed time and energy) that guides his or her pursuit of simplicity. In pursuit of simplicity one is striving to align one's life with one's values. One expects that the practitioner is able to articulate the values that guide the movement toward simplicity. Examples of this might be time with the family, community involvement, volunteer work, religious practice, art, political activism, and ecological activism. These two criteria, i.e., conscious intent to simplify and a conscious goal of doing so, are the essential characteristics of the informant.

I sought mainstream adherents of voluntary simplicity. This excluded Amish informants, for example. The reason for doing so is that I was interested in the phenomenon as a mainstream event. The current trend represents a potential cultural change, with an impact on the future, whereas traditional and closed groups will not exemplify something new in our cultural fabric.

I interviewed one individual, three childless couples, and four families of three or more. When meeting with the families the child was included, at least somewhat, in all but Interview 9, when the couple elected to meet me in an espresso bar.

Originally, I planned to seek families of at least three exclusively, but the informants themselves indicated that whether to start a family is a pivotal issue for those who embrace simplicity. Meeting with household units of various sizes permitted me to

observe levels of emergence. I wanted to know how voluntary simplicity integrates with, and help define, an interactional system. Do the parents (married or divorced) agree on the value of this way of life? How do the children perceive it? How does one child's interaction with a parent regarding simplicity affect the way the parents interact? As discussed in Chapter Two, groups of people manifest higher orders of behavior that cannot be observed when only the individual is considered. Other criteria included verbal confirmation of some facets of the definition presented by Elgin (1993/1981), such as involvement with compassionate causes, mastery motive, etc.

Obtaining Informants.

Informants were located through networking in the Ames, Iowa, area. A number of potential informants had heard about my interest and offered to be in this study. Some informants offered to provide introductions to others, indicating that there is a network of practitioners in the area who know one another. Purposeful sampling (Stainback & Stainback, 1984) involved asking informants for referrals to other potential informants based on criteria emerging throughout the course of research. Qualitative research aims to open domains of meaning in response to informants' descriptions. No theoretical model was assumed, and interpretations were modified as the body of descriptions grew. Questions such as "Do you know anyone who practices voluntary simplicity who, in your view, differs significantly from your way of viewing it?" afforded diversity and more richness of description.

Informed Consent

All participants signed informed consent forms.

Setting of Interviews

The setting of the interviews involved some negotiation. The interviewer's preferred setting was the family residence, which afforded the opportunity to get rich data from the family in context. In fact, interviews one through eight took place in the informants's residence. Interview Nine was the exception, when the informants requested an interview at a local espresso bar in the Ames, Iowa area.

The interviews each lasted approximately 1-1/2 hours. Each informant had one interview (i.e., there were no follow-up interviews, save for member checks).

Attendance

When interviewing married couples, both partners attended the interview. When children were part of the family (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Nine), I was able to interact with the children in all but Interview Nine. The parents permitted the children to participate directly in interviews One and Four. I had dinner with the family in Interview Two, affording the opportunity to converse with their son. I met the couple in Interview Nine at an espresso bar, and they elected to come without their teenaged children, who had other events to attend that evening.

Method of Recording Interview

The first stage of recording interviews was the informal observation of the interview setting (when the interview was in the informant's home). The physical context of the interview offers an understanding of what is to follow. Does the setting appear congruent with voluntary simplicity? If so, then how? If not, then how did it clash with the presentation of simplicity?

All interviews were recorded on audiotape. The first five interviews were transcribed for analysis. At this point, in consultation with my major professor, we agreed that the data were becoming redundant. The final four interviews were taped and I listened to the tapes for idiosyncratic data.

Content of Interviews

Noema and Noesis

Informants led the interview as much as possible in the fashion presented by Spradley (1979). The Grand Tour question was "How do you describe voluntary simplicity?" Two mini-tour questions followed the Grand Tour question, one reflecting the noematic dimension and the other reflecting the noetic. The question, "What is it like to live simply?" opened exploration of the noematic dimension. The interviewer asked for clarification and expansion of points presented by informants. "What things do you do and think that, you believe, embody your commitment to voluntary simplicity?" opened exploration of the noetic dimension. Again, the interviewer probed the responses of informants in a spirit of being a student of the informants. By Interview Three, and in consultation with my second informants, I substituted the question, "Why do you live simply?" because it was a more natural question that elicited valuable data in both the noetic and noematic categories.

The interviewer listened attentively to encourage lengthy responses to the Grand Tour question. More information was sought through the use of descriptive, structural, and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). Descriptive questions ask the informant to expand on modifiers used to present their experience ("Can you explain what you mean by...?"). Structural questions request information about other possible domains ("You

mentioned that you perceive different types of simplicity. Could you explain that further?"). Contrast questions ask the informant to distinguish differences between related terms ("In what way are the two types of simplicity you mentioned different?").

After the Grand Tour question had been thoroughly explored mini-tour questions were posed, along with any new questions that might have emerged for the interviewer during the course of the interview. Some of these are discussed in the next section.

Social Emergence

Interviewing families affords levels of information that individual interviews do not allow, as discussed in the previous chapter. Voluntary simplicity is a major commitment and, as such, will expectedly encode aspects of a family's structure. Questions in this category were prompted by the family's presentation. The interviewer's acquaintance with family therapy interviewing techniques came into play as the interviewer requested, for example how voluntary simplicity is a part of the relationships of various family members. Themes of voluntary simplicity united individuals at times, and described a conflict at another, or multiple themes simultaneously. Different participants in an interaction often played different roles (the Heavy, an aggrieved second party, a sympathetic third party to a previously two-party interaction). Unlike a clinical interview, the interviewer was not looking for problems in the family, but instead used interviewing techniques to note any circular patterns of interaction with voluntary simplicity as their theme. Comparison of data from each family member would be a second source of emergent social themes.

Observer Effects

Most interviews included a debriefing aspect to have some gauge of the interviewer's impact on the observed. The debriefing question asked informants to describe what it was like to participate in the interview. I cut one interview short due to time constraints imposed by one informant's late arrival. I was unable to pose debriefing questions during that interview.

Analysis of Data

The researcher completed a careful reading of each transcript using highlighting and margin notes to condense the data into a summary form. The interviewer simultaneously listened to the audiotape while reading the transcript. Once three to five such summaries were completed the summaries themselves were compared for similar categories of related meanings for each interview with individuals or groups (Joanning & Keoughan, 1998). The data from ethnographic family interviews was analyzed for noetic and noematic dimensions. The two dimensions were then compared to obtain any emergent themes suggested by the comparison to fulfil the goal of mapping the enaction of simplicity. Interpretations relating to the social interaction of simplicity were obtained and analyzed through direct descriptions and through comparisons of family members' descriptions.

Category clusters were classified and named according to whether they were common across groups, common to subgroups or individuals, or leftover (Joanning & Keoughan, 1998). Then, clusters were categorized into domains of related meanings. The entire process of categorizing was subject to change as meanings continued to emerge during inquiry.

A domain is a category of phenomenological categories. The domain is constituted by multiple categories of meaning that are ultimately grounded in the informant's phenomenology (Sturtevant, 1974).

Domain analysis was constantly subjected to the possibility of revision based on further reflection, member checks (see below), and peer debriefing.

Rigor in Ethnographic Interviews

Credibility

I shared a summary of the transcript and analysis with informants in Interviews One, Two, Four, and the group interview. This follow-up contact (or *member check*) verified the accuracy of the data and invited further comment, revisions, etc. Informants were asked to sign off on summaries. Subsequent interviews took place after the prior interview had been thoroughly analyzed (Joanning & Keoughan, 1998). *Peer debriefing* followed some interviews to further enhance provisions for credibility. This involved a discussion with peers about observations and interpretations of data and listening to their responses. This helped ensure that the researcher was not adding something to his interpretations that was not justified by the data. Having two approaches, i.e., ethnographic interviews and participant observation, added *triangulation* to the study and provided further credibility for the interpretations that followed.

Triangulation allows a binocular perspective by providing a complementary viewpoint. In this study, approaching two different populations (committed practitioners and simplicity study circle participants) permits one to view voluntary simplicity as an emergent phenomenon, similar to the experience of depth that emerges when one uses both eyes to look at a thing. Study group members were casually involved in voluntary

simplicity, in contrast to the immersion noted in most of the ethnographic interviews. In this case, the binocular view suggested by triangulating ethnographic family interviews and a group voluntary simplicity interview is that voluntary simplicity is a practice first and a philosophy second. This point will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by doing *theoretical/purposive sampling* (Guba, 1981). This means seeking a spectrum of informants who embodied voluntary simplicity in diverse ways. A key source of variability in informants comes from asking informants for a referral to other informants who, in their view, embody simplicity in a different way than they do. The simplicity study circle attracted a different type of informant than the family ethnographic interviews. This further developed provisions for transferability, as it allowed the researcher to investigate a broader spectrum of phenomena manifesting simplicity. The broader spectrum allowed more emergence for the researcher's analysis.

A second way of addressing transferability was to collect *thick descriptions* of context when conducting the study. The researcher carefully documented the environment of the interview, the time, and other contextual factors that might explain aspects of the interview. A careful description of context helped ensure that one can predict the manifestation of simplicity in future circumstances that resemble that context. Thick descriptions allow the reader to judge the fittingness of data to the context, and thus better gauge the resemblance of other contexts to those described in the study.

Dependability

I arranged a *dependability audit* by a peer to ensure dependability.

Charles Joannides, Ph.D. audited Interview Three in the following manner. I mailed the audiotaped interview, the interview transcript, the transcript summary and interpretation, and the combined data analysis. Dr. Joannides listened to the tape while reading the transcript, then examined the two summaries to verify that: (1) the summary adequately represented the interview, (2) that the interpretations were based on the data, and (3) that the interpretation accounted for all the data.

Dr Joannides is a graduate of the doctoral program in Human Development and Family Studies, Marriage and Family Therapy Specialization, at Iowa State University. He has expanded his own doctoral research to include more than 400 ethnographic interviews.

Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed in terms of a *peer audit* (see above section) of the data to check that interpretations fit the data and that the data supported the interpretations. Having two avenues of inquiry (ethnographic interviews and simplicity study circle group interview) provided *triangulation* and *member checks* were obtained throughout the study (Guba, 1981).

Interviews involved member checks subsequent to data analysis and prior to further interviews.

Participant Observation

Background of Simplicity Circles

The second major approach to my topic entailed the formation of a simplicity study circle. Simplicity circles are groups of people who are interested in studying and discussing issues in the process of pursuing voluntary simplicity. Cecile Andrews (1997) first applied the term "simplicity circle," as currently used. Andrews credits the nineteenth century Swedes for the concept of study circle as it exists today. Sweden was a poverty-stricken country at that time, with many immigrating to other countries in search of material prosperity. The Chautauqua movement in the United States, a popular educational movement at the time that included home-based study circles, impressed delegates from Sweden seeking to improve conditions at home.

Applied in Sweden, peasant groups engaged in self-empowering study circles that enabled them to educate themselves, deal with problems, and learn about self-governance. Andrews notes that Sweden is still known as a study circle democracy. In addition to the functions described above study circles today are instruments of reform, with ideas being pursued through many such groups before being implemented by the government.

A second movement inspired Andrews' coinage of the term simplicity circles. The nineteenth-century Danes were also suffering from poverty and many disasters. A peasant movement termed Folk Schools arose to strengthen the culture and social fabric of the country. Today Denmark is a democracy with a high standard of living, but Folk Schools still thrive. Folk Schools today are residential institutions without requirements

for admission. They function to help people to be responsible for their own learning, to live cooperatively, and to solve societal problems.

Simplicity Study Circles

Andrews (1997) observes that the word, "study" derives from a Latin word indicating zest and enthusiasm. "Circle" indicates life itself, because of its resemblance to many organic or life-supporting forms, such as the earth, the sun, the shape of many life forms, etc. It also indicates social connectedness and equality.

Thus, a simplicity circle entails a democratically run group assembled to study, discuss, and reflect upon, etc., the practical issues bearing on one's relationship to consumption and time. It lacks strong social hierarchy in favor of a deliberate cultivation of equality, thus encouraging all voices to participate in its process. Andrews (1997) describes the process as an intellectual barn raising.

Finding Participants

The group was announced through posters placed in commercial establishments in the Ames, Iowa area. The body of the poster read:

> A simplicity study circle aims to examine the relationship between consuming and fulfillment. A basic premise of voluntary simplicity is that most of us have unrealistic expectations about this relationship. Study circle meetings involve biweekly meetings focused on reading and other relevant discussion subjects. Based on a movement begun in Sweden, study circles are democratically run groups designed for the self-empowerment of its members. More specifically, a simplicity study circle represents a gentle countercultural force designed to develop our consciousness of what is enough. The voices of circle members provide a wise counterpoint to the everpresent voice of Madison Avenue. For further information, contact Tim Mullaney at 233-3522.

Guidelines

The simplicity study circle met every two weeks. We met in the Ames Public Library. The time of meetings was 7:00 PM, ending at 9:00 PM. Confidentiality was stressed to promote comfort in talking about money more freely.

I assumed leadership of the group due to my being the only member to volunteer. Evidently, members were uncomfortable leading our meetings. After the initial orientation meeting, sessions began with a check among participants to allow time to share relevant events in the participant's life that week, steps taken to live more simply, etc. Discussion followed using Andrews' The circle of simplicity (1997), a book that is credited with launching the simplicity study circle movement. The group leader facilitated discussion of the chapter planned for that week. This book focuses on a set of themes related to voluntary simplicity, such as community, and finding one's passion. A discussion guide in the back provides an agenda for simplicity study circle meetings.

Data Collection

As a participant observer, a sensitive issue emerged. One's attempts to observe necessitate types of participation that can alter the process one is observing in fundamental ways. Money is normally considered a private concern in our culture, and talking about money could have been influenced by the presence of a graduate student using the group for information that will leave the group. Being a participant was one way to mitigate this effect, as the sincere involvement of the researcher in the activities of the group lessened the social distance with other members. Group members were informed that the researcher would be using his experiences in the group as a part of his doctoral research.

The first method of collecting data was to record observations about the group during and after group. These observations were descriptive in nature and recorded in order to form inferences at a later time.

The second, and main method of collecting data was an interview covering the same content as in the first study. This interview was conducted at the conclusion of our book. As in the first study, I posed the Grand Tour question, "How do you describe voluntary simplicity?" Since the interviewer was also a member, I answered questions with the other members. As in the first study, the interview was transcribed and analyzed. The analysis was later shared with group members.

Data Analysis

Noesis and Noema

The researcher had the tapes transcribed and studied them in the manner discussed in the ethnographic interviews. Recorded observations (or tapes) were analyzed for domains in the manner described earlier (Spradley, 1979). To parallel the ethnographic interview analysis, I analyzed participants' statements and other communications for noetic and noematic dimensions of enacted simplicity in process. I compared these statements grouped by individuals to arrive at the enacted simplicity as an epistemic unity for a given individual.

Social Emergence

Comparisons of communications between group members disclosed emergent social themes related to voluntary simplicity study circles. A study circle has analogous phenomena to those of the family, as simplicity served to connect individuals in a social structure. This social structure tended to seek a dynamic equilibrium.

Summary

This chapter presented an approach to knowing voluntary simplicity. Proceeding from the last chapter's analysis of knowledge, two major dimensions of knowing were presented: (1) Comparisons of descriptions across individuals and (2) comparisons of the noetic and noematic dimensions within individual descriptions.

Two major methods of acquiring descriptions allow these comparisons: (1) an ethnographic interview format with families and (2) a participant observation project involving the formation of a simplicity study circle.

Methods of ensuring rigor in the studies add credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to the subsequent analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: OBSERVING AND PARTICIPATING IN VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: DATA AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

There were nine total interviews over the course of the research. Eight of the interviews involved committed families, couples, and one individual. One interview focused on a voluntary simplicity study circle that had met from January to May of 1999. Early informants advised me that the study should include more childless couples and individuals, because the decision to have children is highly focal for those who live simply. Their advice convinced me to veer from my original plan to interview only families with children.

The format of data presentation shifted as the study progressed. For this reason the data are presented in chronological order. I allowed the data to suggest how the interview should be organized, with experience suggesting higher-order criteria that became incorporated into the representation of successive interviews

First-order voluntary simplicity, as presented in all summaries below, consists of the active dimension of voluntary simplicity, or what my informants say they do and think (noesis). The passive dimension of voluntary simplicity is what they value and experience (noema). As discussed in the second chapter, On Knowing, these dimensions reciprocally maintain one another. The first-order analysis will consist of studying the statements of individual informants for constitutive (noetic) and constituted (noematic) dimensions and seeking a higher-order perspective that unites the two.

Second-order voluntary simplicity is the interactional dance that maintains and further generates this value. Second-order analysis involves studying the interaction of informants during the interview in order to observe the pattern of the interactions.

The section on observer effects reflects a third-order analysis of the interview process. It attempts to account for the impact of the interviewer's presence on that which he observed. This analysis consists of a careful study of the interactional patterns involving the interviewer and the informants.

The combined analysis is a third-order analysis of voluntary simplicity obtained by comparing statements made across all interviews. It seeks to place voluntary simplicity in a broader social context.

Summary, Interview One

Introduction

Mel and Donna are in their early 40's. Mel is a professor on a tenure track. Donna consults and serves on the corporate board of a local health food store. Their son, Sam was approximately eight at the time of the interview. Eleanor, their daughter, was a baby. They live in an established neighborhood, close to Iowa State University, where Mel is employed. I interviewed them in their home, which I found adequately but not excessively furnished.

First-Order Voluntary Simplicity

Mel

Noesis. *Reflection*: Identify with environmentalism, morality (reduce class differences), simplicity results in greater contentment (less financial pressure), and a thoughtful relationship to technology (e.g., house location permits use of bicycle)

Choosing an academic career is related to potential time for other things, like vacation, and family interaction (marital dyad, especially). Donna is the leader regarding simplicity. Wish that more neighborhoods were built "pedestrian friendly."

Noesis. *Actions*: Bicycle (because bicycling results in fun, relaxation, exercise, and transportation. It is environmentally correct and it saves money), Not replacing things that break (dishwasher), sorting garbage, thinking about where you live before you commit to a living situation (payoffs include lower expenditures, more time, longer vacation). Try to minimize TV viewing (economize on time), cook (results in time together, more ecological, and less expensive), gardening, can vegetables. Buy food that is produced locally, wear clothes more between washings, shower less often than daily, turn off the water while soaping, use energy-efficient bulbs, minimize auto usage (8000mi/year on car). Think carefully about needs before choosing to purchase things (dining room chairs are used, out of ecosystemic considerations and price). Bought a freezer for bulk quantities of locally grown meat. Put off purchases (examples of putting off purchases: Jeans, CD player, and dining room chairs). Getting along without: air conditioning, microwave, dishwasher, power lawn mower, second car, portable phone, CD player, home computer. Discuss purchases a great deal before proceeding.

Noema. *Experience/Affect*: We're "too comfortable." We're "not making a sacrifice." Guilt, that I could do more and I'm not. "Stressful" (due to career) "Shock" (colleague sold house in town to move to larger development, tying him to his salary and to his car) "Shock" (that so many people with high incomes consider themselves poor). "Depressed" at others' material consumption.

Donna

Noesis. *Reflections*: Having children affects choice to use bicycle. Choosing whether to have a child (or more than one child) is an important consideration if you value simplicity. Intention: Ecological responsibility, to have discretionary time (for elective activities, volunteerism), safety and security, less exploitation of other countries, set an example for the aspiring third world nations. Leadership role for local community as well (constructive use of competition by setting an example to be emulated). "Stress comes from elective activities" (Donna, saying that Mel's description of stress is too negative). Try to avoid making "statements" due to concerns about blending socially. Wish for cooperative cooking with neighbors.

Noesis. *Actions*: We "skim" off the mainstream culture (garage sales, classifieds, and hand-me-downs). Chose to install air conditioning in car for comfort of infant daughter on long car trips.

Noema. *Affective/Experiential*: Sense of selfishness (about having two children) due to environmental impact of having children. Simplicity is "liberating" (e.g., getting a small apartment when Mel was in graduate school, with minimal furnishings, low maintenance, and extra time). Having "sanity" in personal life.

Sam

"Too complicated" (Donna indicates that Sam would like his parents to be less busy.)

Second-Order Voluntary Simplicity

Mel's descriptions of experience have connotations of pain and social boundary (save for "comfortable," about which he expresses discomfort). Pain words include

"shock" (over colleague's buying expensive home in the country), and "depression" (others find low-tech or no-tech strange). He uses these words in the passive voice, ("I was shocked," "That depresses me,") defining a social boundary, where simplicity becomes a subcultural value that separates those who embrace simplicity from those who do not, and possibly indicates inclusion of those who do embrace simplicity. There was a possible influence posed by interviewer due to ways he falls short on environmental responsibility (Mel spoke of "embarrassment over not wanting to preach"). The notion of a subculture would account for the wording he used to describe simplicity and his interactions with others on the relevant themes that concern him.

Boundaries

Many statements implied social boundaries. The following paraphrased statements illustrate awareness of social boundary related to simplicity "Not trying to make statement about how much we spend." "Shock" over how many friends with high incomes consider themselves poor. "Admiration" of some over low-tech solutions. "Shock" of some people over the same. ("That depresses me.") Both spouses expressed distance from voluntary simplicity movement (because it is faddish and recent). Critical of ostentatious simplicity (people who try to outdo one another in living simply). I'm conscious of a wish to show off (describing canning to the interviewer). Donna wishes for cooperative cooking with neighbors. "Shock" over acquaintances who move to excessively large (or expensive) homes, long for pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, embarrassment of disclosure to interviewer, desire to connect in cooperative ways more, Mel posed the questions (for interviewer) to Sam, which I understood as a protective gesture.

Extended Family

The following reflections illustrate the role of simplicity in setting boundaries with their extended family: Avoid making a "statement." (Attempts to make statements caused past familial offense.) "Statements" about voluntary simplicity in general are not necessarily wise (for example, moving to the country, requiring use of auto). Lead by example. Avoid criticism of others.

Family Interaction

Mel and Donna acknowledge that Donna is the leader regarding simplicity. Mel described a "tug of war," with Mel playing the more materialistic role. Other comments and nonverbal communication appear to illustrate relationships within their nuclear family, such as: Getting car air-conditioning because of their infant, describing Sal as "not the usual child" (refuses TV, interest in politics). Spouses talk about purchases (respectful confrontation, collaboration), members unite for interviewer (for example: making fun of "tongue cleaners" in an ecologically oriented catalogue). The family unite against materialistic attitudes of friends and family, they are collaborative, respectful and supportive of their son's participation in the interview. Sal is in alliance with parents and especially mother (he agrees with and defends her statements). Cooking unites the family, and is stressed as a significant ritual by both adults. Self-criticism activates Sal's defense of parent.

Role of Interviewer: Social Construction

When the interviewer categorizes some behavior as "statements," it stimulates multiple corrections by Mel. He describes a "small desire to show off" to the interviewer, regarding his canning description, and embarrassment about talking to the interviewer,

"We know a little about you..." (i.e., I'm not a very good example of voluntary simplicity). Story about the family they rented from, concerned with not being seen as placing themselves on a higher plane.

Member Check

Mel and Donna agreed that the data summary was an adequate representation of the data. Mel expressed discomfort with the description of competition among committed individuals, but agreed that he had indeed described competition. Apparently, I was betraying a secret from within his social network that posed the threat of offending other members of that network should this analysis reach their hands. Mel's reaction confirmed my hypothesis that simplicity defined a subculture for this family, with identified insiders and outsiders. (The interviewees that Mel was concerned about did not request a copy of the dissertation, and received only a combined summary, lacking identifying information linked to Mel's observation).

Summary, Interview Two

Introduction

Noreen (42) and Guy (44) live on Guy's parents' farm, earning livelihoods through community sponsored agriculture (Guy) and clerical work (Noreen). They are war tax resistors, living below the taxable income level to avoid supporting a war. They live with their son, Emil (approximately 10). I interviewed the couple at their home near Nevada, Iowa.

Their home was comfortably furnished, notwithstanding the color scheme from the 1970's. A wood stove heated their home.

First-Order Voluntary Simplicity

Guy

Noesis. *Reflections*: The couple stated that they are war-tax resistors, associated with the Iowa peace network. Voluntary simplicity means making conscious decisions (e.g., Noreen works ¾ time), flexibility creates environment where Guy can garden (farm). To be simple is to be focused. Avoid the trap of needing things and money to pay for the things. Choose how you spend your time. Consider connections, i.e., how does one's decisions affect people elsewhere? (economically, ecologically, socially) "Follow your bliss." (discussing his farming). Attracted to the social gospel. (Guy) was interested in monastic life when he was younger. Intention: To live in alignment with values (reflecting social gospel of the Catholic church, Amish influence, experience overseas in El Salvador and Bolivia, Guy's current faith-based group, and family of origin). Guy's desire is to reflect the influence of friends in El Salvador and Bolivia, and to reduce the dissonance of living amidst so much privilege. The family was able to buy their house in cash. Freed us to do things we otherwise wouldn't do. Vacations, (Emil enjoys this).

Guy's siblings indicate that the value of Guy's close proximity to their parents supercedes concerns about inheritance of their parents' farm. The siblings report that their anxiety is reduced. Guy wrote about his father, and shared it with him His father thought Guy said he was too materialistic. Guy also reacted to his father's attitude. He admires his father's honesty, integrity, and his hardworking nature. Guy differs (with father) on the issue of interdependence, i.e., relying on others and being available to them also. Parents are happy to have them near. There is an isolation experience associated

with the extended family's tastes (e.g., going to Lethal Weapon with Emil's cousins). Easier to be among like-minded people they share values with

Noesis. *Actions*: Live interdependently. The couple exchange services with others (e.g., looking after parents in exchange for free rent) Guy bartered his labor (cutting wood) in exchange for pottery used for an Iowa Peace Network fundraiser. Networks with other Iowa Peace Network members regarding needs that can be fulfilled through bartering. Plan to spend Christmas 1999 in El Salvador. Negotiates with Emil (son) regarding what toys to buy. If they are war toys Guy does not share play. Buying other toys involves co-play with his Dad. Buying more toys would mean less time together (it would require that they earn more money). Guy leaves Emil the option of paying out of his own money for special toys.

Noema. *Experience/Affect*: Guy expressed surprise over instant community at national war tax resistance conference. He described a "delightful" time associating with people living lightly on the earth so others might have enough. He described a "delightful funny time" when friend from that conference visited. It is satisfying to get feedback from people who buy from Guy, and knowing the connectedness and building of interdependence it represents. He expressed astonishment that the interviewer found him. Image of empty bowl makes Guy peaceful (the bowl indicates the potential to receive).

Noreen

Noesis. *Reflections*: Voluntary simplicity is hard work, requiring that you temper what you know (regarding consuming) with a nonjudgmental approach to what others consume She suspends judgment of others, saying "isn't this interesting?" when others' behavior is excessive. Seeing extreme poverty (volunteering in Bolivia and El Salvador)

and returning to this culture made the choice to live simply easier. She was concerned that most families need two incomes. Reflects on how many people are down the ladder. Concerned with Christmas season and expressing love in nonmaterial terms (The interview took place during Christmas season). Intention: To reflect the effect of living overseas. Noreen felt moved by the friendships she made in Bolivia and El Salvador. She asks herself what would be helpful to her and her loved ones. She describes her parents as "frugal" but states that they had plenty growing up.

Noesis. *Actions*: She practiced using her stipend in conscientious ways while in Bolivia. Noreen monitors for any indication of bitterness in Emil regarding the family's decision to simplify (none detected). Shops with mother-in-law for purpose of family bonding. Hosted family reunion.

Noema. *Experience/Affect*: "Lethal Weapon 4 almost made me sick." Worrying about social implications of every purchase was something I couldn't deal with any more. "...didn't think it was healthy." Reacted strongly to gap between rich and poor (overseas). Reacted to her family and their choices after returning to the United States (from Central America). Enjoys the pleasures of freedom and community, freedom from debt, freedom to spend on occasional niceties, and joys of connectedness with others. Stress of responsibility for purchases and their consequences, for unfairness of the distribution of wealth, in the context of an alien ethos of both culture and family.

Noema. *Values*: Respect for others, inclusive of others who would disagree with her values. Social equity, having time for loved ones. Community, freedom from debt, freedom to acquire things when desired.

Second-Order Observation

The spousal communication was harmonious. Their nonverbal behavior indicates that the spouses share the same views, by and large. Sharing views appears to define a meaningful aspect of the marital and parental bond. Guy took the lead in presenting views, but Noreen appeared to agree in more ways than not. The tone of the interview was gentle and often humorous. Stories about MCC (the group sponsoring their humanitarian activity) activities in El Salvador were moving to this interviewer, and posed a compelling explanation for their conversion. Voluntary simplicity provides connectedness to family and a community of spiritual kin. It does so through the sharing of spiritual, emotional (friendship), and financial (bartering and business relationships) spheres.

Observer Effects

When asked what it was like to participate in the interview Guy diverted the question to other concerns. Specifically, he was preoccupied with the suffering of the children of a person know to him after their father murder/suicided with their mother. He was also concerned with the victims of hurricane Mitch. Perhaps this was a gentle criticism of the interviewer's question.

Member Check

Guy and Nora approved of the summary I presented to them. Nora was surprised by the observation that she described more of the struggles of embracing simplicity than Guy did. She suggested that she may have felt responsible for presenting a complementary viewpoint to Guy's. She indicated that, essentially, they agreed about

simplicity. Noreen's observation was congruent with the collaborative interactional style observed throughout the interview and subsequent member check.

Summary, Interview Three

Introduction

John and Lenora are a childless couple in their early 50's. They live in a house that John designed and built himself. Two floors are below ground, with a substantial social space on the ground level, where they cook, eat, and entertain. A wood stove heated this space. They earn incomes by small-scale farming for the CSA in the Ames, Iowa area, selling eggs, playing music, and from Lenora's art.

The first-order data are organized according to noesis and noema for each participant. I also noted (from previous interviews) that noesis can be divided into reflections and actions, while noema can be divided into values, experience, and affect. Not all subsequent informants offered statements in all categories, accounting for why they do not appear in all data presentations. The new division is more parsimonious and the data appeared more understandable.

First-Order Analysis

John

Noesis. *Reflections*: People have no discretionary time, need to know what one values and wants, society justifies lack of time, money and time are inversely related, "voluntary simplicity" is not really voluntary. Compulsory once you grasp its meaning (it makes sense). Local economies are more in accord with natural systems (than global economies). Concern: escalating cost of health care.

Noesis. *Action*: Built his home (learned from father) (reflection: "What is a home?"), buy things with values in mind (e.g. a dishwasher would have unacceptable financial and social costs, such as losing the opportunity to converse while washing the dishes). John collaborates (w/partner) on buying decisions.

Noema: *Affective*: Sadness (social fabric is weakening, the experience of the elderly is not respected, we're shut off from aging parents).

Noema. *Values*: value of discretionary time, family and friends, community. Most people give up too much in return for money. Values freedom. Playing music. Having work one enjoys. Skills learned from parents. Local economy supports community and social fabric.

Lenora

Noesis. *Reflections*: Lots of ways of doing things (e.g., building a home). Simplicity is being tuned into natural systems and not fighting them. Spouse was important for relearning essential life skills. Natural systems are complex (not simple). Closeness to natural systems means easier adaptation in the event of technological collapse (e.g., woodburning stove). Learned by watching parents as a child.

Noesis. *Actions*: "weaning" from materialistic behavior. Playing music, freelance artist, creating one's environment (especially one's home). Keep old cars. Discuss purchases with spouse (e.g., new mattress, new stove).

Noema. *Affective*: Joy (explicitly connects joy to creating). Rewarding.

Noema. *Values*: consciousness of one's reasons for doing things. Work and play are the same. Activities are balanced. Being a stakeholder (support local economy, local

arts). Meal times. *Influence your environment* (multiple references). Natural systems, local economy (do it yourself). Learn by watching.

Second-Order Analysis

The couple present as united and collaborative. Each builds on what the other says, and there was no evident conflict. John took the lead, and Lenora appeared to allow it, though she spoke frequently and articulately throughout. Lenora challenged the interviewer several times over his wording. The challenges were thought provoking, questioning the terms "voluntary simplicity" and "lifestyle." Lenora possibly has the same role in their relationship, projecting energy, enthusiasm, and a counterpoint. John is pensive and soft-spoken in presentation, making a complementarity with Lenora's interactional style.

Comfort with the goals of the interview was implied in their focused, thoughtful remarks. It appeared that they were accustomed to collaborating with each other. Challenges to the interviewer might reflect a consciousness of their countercultural values and a readiness to demonstrate a social boundary. This observation builds on inferences from previous couples and families who participated in interviews.

John emphasized reflections and values in his remarks. Affective and experiential observations were less frequent, making them all the more significant. The only affect mentioned was sadness, related to the lack of cultural esteem for the aged, and indifference to the wisdom accumulated by old age. The comment followed on earlier comments about the challenges presented by the increasing costs of health care. Combining this with his other comments, sadness goes part and parcel with commitment to values that set him apart from the cultural and economic mainstream. Noetic and

noematic aspects of values (reflection and felt esteem) conflict with prevailing norms. Communities are in great flux, people do not have discretionary time, few people are actually pursuing time before greater means, the economy is world-based, and few are as reflective and philosophical as John.

Lenora emphasized joy and creative engagement in her comments. Her pleasure in making and re-making her environment was articulately spoken. Her involvement with the physical environment of her residence (including the small-scale farming) was an obvious link to the joy she expressed. Having a view and acting to realize the view appear to give rise to her joy.

The affective contrast between John and Lenora is noteworthy. Their presentation in the interview was congruent with the affective words used by each individual. It is possible that the two emphasize points that they perceive their partners as failing to represent. In other words, they might be more similar than their words suggest. Noreen, of Interview 2 made this observation in response to a similar difference, noted by the interviewer, between her and Guy.

Observer Effects

The observer (interviewer) is an outsider in many respects. Most noteworthy are his consumerism, and his excluded status from the couple's system. The couple present as they would for company. The interviewer's use of terms like "voluntary simplicity" provoked challenge and impeded rapport, as did the notion of "lifestyle." Overall, the interviewer was moderately accepted as he explored the topic. The tone of the interview was collaborative and congenial.

Summary, Interview Four

Introduction

Ted (43) and Carol (44) are both tenure track professors at Iowa State University. They live in an established neighborhood with their adoptive son, Sean (approximately age 7), and biological daughter, Eileen (preschool age). Carol's brother, Roy was visiting from Seattle on the evening of the interview. We met in their home.

Their home was comfortably furnished and moderately sized.

First-Order Analysis

Ted

Noesis. *Reflections*: Df: VS is choosing not to complicate your life with material things in particular and with other things as well (e.g., being incredibly scheduled). Must have the potential for luxury consumption to practice VS. We have self-doubt about how are lives are simple right now. Agrees with Carol that relationship is a value of simplicity. Children make it hard to realize simplicity. Exposure to the mainstream culture makes it hard, as well as activities. Having multiple goals creates problems with achieving time. Used to live simply years ago when living in Seattle. Working full-time made the goal of simplicity difficult. Acquaintances recognize the nonmaterial orientation of household (downscale home, riding bike to work). There are those who recognize material limits (environmental) and those who don't. Of those who recognize limits there are those who are willing to do something about it and those who are not willing. VS is for those who recognize limits and are willing to do something about it. This recognition has driven Ted's career choice (biosystems engineer). Important question: How significant are your acts? (Are you making a difference on the

environment)? I'm clueless about how to get rid of the dichotomy (between career/children and simplicity) except to quit my job.

Noesis. *Actions*: Own one car, ride bikes to work, minimize purchases. Bought a house close to work and downtown. Give son option to use his own money when his parents decline to buy things he wants.

Noema. *Values*: Stimulating work. Environmentally responsible consumption

Carol

Noesis. *Reflection*: Much of the world is involuntarily living simply. A lot of VS is about mindful living. Push away noise, focus on essentials, relationships, getting rid of the noisy materialism. Has a spiritual aspect. Maybe it's an outcome of leading a pared down sort of distilled life. Not taking things for granted (Gardening allows this to happen vis a vis food production). Agrees with Ted that kids are more material-oriented than they are. Example: Trips to Target are fraught with requests for extra purchases. We are hampered in the busyness aspect by job. Don't think university life is compatible with VS for that reason. Demands of academe contradict the value of time, relationship, etc. Have contradictory goals. I am more conflicted than (Ted) is. Contradictory goals can place VS out of reach (as defined by C). Doesn't "hate" what she's doing, only wishes there were less to do. Two full-time employed parents make simplicity difficult to achieve. Academe requires much more than it did 30 years ago. One part-time parent allows time for home and family that simplicity requires. Depression-era parents contributed to valuing simplicity (frugal). When there isn't enough to go around, the real movement toward simplicity will emerge. Limiting car usage and number of children are two environmentally important decisions. Recycling is relatively insignificant. People (even

those who value simplicity) seem to be trying to "anchor" their living space by acquiring things. "Conspicuous nonconsumption" is another perverse expression of simplicity.

Noesis. *Actions:* Attempt to instruct kids about simplicity "haphazardly." Subordinate simplicity to career. Gardening (w/children). One car (old). Two adoptive children. TV stays off much of the time so family will interact more.

Noema. *Value:* Solitude. Relationship, less material "noise." Not taking things for granted.

Noema. *Experience:* Feel wound up much of the time, due to job. Pressure.

Tim

Reflection: Standard of living is about "average." Would like to own more things (e.g., Nintendo).

Summary of First-Order Enaction

Ted expressed little in the way of experiential descriptions compared to Carol's description of pressure from career and her longing for more time, relationship, less "noise," spirituality, focus on essentials, etc. Possibly, the relative absence of experiential description reflects the social expectation that men should achieve in their careers. More personally, it may reflect the decision to defer gratification for one phase of his life (i.e., pre-tenure). Wishing for less conflict would not be functional, if that were the case. Subordination (Carol's concept) succinctly describes their relationship to simplicity. They value simplicity as much as possible while pursuing demanding careers and parental roles. They subordinate simplicity to their life context, but the context remains uncomfortable, particularly for Carol. Possibly, the situation is tolerable because of the time-limited nature of their context (tenure-track professors).

Second-Order Analysis

Spousal interaction was respectful and collaborative. Carol occasionally challenged Ted on a statement, but there was clear functionality to the interaction (putting the point precisely was the function).

There were some significant differences in their views and values. Ted states that he is less conflicted about the dichotomy he described between valuing simplicity and valuing a stimulating but demanding job. Carol is not happy to sacrifice peacefulness, relationship, and time at home for profession, albeit she wants her profession too. Though both spouses value solitude, Ted is unambiguous in communicating his felt need for it, a need that supercedes his desire for more relationship.

The couple present themselves very objectively. Polyphony is clearly respected in their marriage. Both partners show a clear dichotomy in the attention given to the reflective dimension vs. attention to all other dimensions. The nature of the interview elicits this partially, as I explicitly request their reflections on simplicity. But it is also true that I requested descriptions of what it is like to live simply (Ted noted that he could only recollect this). I speculate that leading academic lives requires a highly developed reflective consciousness, and that the interview mirrors their lives in this respect.

Role of Interviewer in Interview Process: Observer Effects

Relations were friendly and sometimes humorous during the interview. I appeared to function as a reminder of values that are usually "subordinated" during this phase of their lives. The couple were obviously comfortable in critiquing their simplicity. There were indications of dispassionate analysis, evidenced by the sometimes-painful conflicts

in values articulated by Ted, and especially, Carol. They were sophisticated informants, Carol herself often conducting ethnographic interviews.

The informants represent the interviewer's aspirations upon completing the doctorate. This influences the interviewer toward a respectful stance, and perhaps an uncomfortable one as he listened to their descriptions of extreme stress associated with their new careers as professors. I was aware of focusing on the need to allow them to lead the interview and avoiding my urge to talk about my own concerns about assuming an academic post.

Member Check

It was difficult to reach Lucy. I waited weeks for a response to my e-mail. She apologized, citing overwhelming job pressures as the problem. Because she could not see a way to get together for a member check I e-mailed the couple's summary to her. She indicated that it summarized their views at that time "very well." The difficulty in reaching her was congruent with the many descriptions of time clutter described in the original interview.

Summary of Group Interview

Introduction

Four individuals participated in the Simplicity Study Circle interview. The individuals were representative of the group composition as it occurred during the previous months from January through May. Attending were Sam, Jill, Claire (43), and Tim (45). We had recently completed The circle of simplicity by Cecile Andrews, a book that is credited with stimulating the formation of simplicity circles internationally. This book was a departure from the original plan to read Dominguez and Robin's Your money

or your life. I substituted the Andrews book because it lent itself well to discussion and the examination of attitudes. Unlike the other informants, participants in the study circle were (mostly) unrelated. The exception was my wife, Claire, who found the idea of a simplicity study circle attractive. Another point of departure from other informants was the more casual involvement with the notion of simplicity among group members.

Sam (41) is single and lives alone. He is a grain elevator inspector for the state of Iowa. Jill (53) lives with her husband. She works part-time at a local travel store in Ames, Iowa. Her two children have grown up and are recently living independently. Claire (43) is a hand therapist for the medical center in Ames, Iowa. Tim (45) is a doctoral candidate at Iowa State University and the author of this document. The interview took place in Jill's home in Ames, Iowa.

Due to the interviewer's dual role as member of the group and researcher, he elected to answer the same questions posed to the other group members.

First-Order Analysis

Sam

Noesis. *Reflections*: VS is consciously choosing, slow down (fewer activities and consuming less) leave rat race. Community is important. Need to be conscious of the effects that your behavior and choices on community and environment. Wouldn't say that I live simply. Relates purchasing to the question of whether the purchase justifies the expenditure of life energy it took to earn the money to purchase the thing.

Noesis. *Actions*: Turn down the heat/air conditioner. Recycle. Fewer acquisitions. Ask myself before buying if this thing will make me any happier. Like to stay put when I'm home from work.

Noema. *Feeling/Experiential*: Feels connected when windows are open in the summer (and air conditioner is off). Overwhelmed feeling precedes interest in VS.

Noema. *Values*: VS group expands one's thinking about VS.

Claire

Noesis. *Reflections*: "voluntary" is important distinction. The treadmill is path of least resistance (don't have to consider the point of your life. Stepping off treadmill allows you to consider the panorama.). T's idea of resting mind and body would help one discover what one doesn't like. You get fed up with being dissatisfied and eventually get the courage to say no to activities. I say there isn't a thing that can happen on (my) job that will kill me. Working part-time helps find balance (not all your eggs are in one basket). Consume less than other households, have a lot of junk, room for improvement, still on activity treadmill. Busy-ness reflects enculturation. Children know natural simplicity. We tend to accept the need for simplicity as just a personal problem, when it is better solved through group process. Happiness is based on selfless giving.

Noesis. *Actions*: Simplified activities and consumption. Drive an older car. Make clothes last. Recycle. Responsible purchasing (ecologically).

Noema. *Feeling/Experiential*: Working part-time adds a feeling of worth to life. Sentimental over ownership of (deceased) father's large car.

Noema. *Values*: Family lives on part-time income. Reasons for VS are important. VS group is essential to help simplify life.

Jill

Noesis. *Reflections*: thought VS group had to do with discussions on the impact of materialism and getting rid of possessions. Surprised by the focus on discovering one's

passions in book discussions. VS is living consciously. Focusing on certain things. Conscious choice produces feeling of control. Frenetic busy-ness (doing things you don't care to do) produces feeling of being driven to no particular end. Parents need to teach kids not to try to do it all. More cultural permission to refuse activities as you get older. Being able to let go makes you more trustworthy on the job (more wisdom). Can't recall "natural simplicity" (T's comment). Can achieve belongingness through sports. Questions whether it's necessary to shop for groceries so often (prompted by T's "buy nothing days." Husband works too much and does not mind his health enough. Dissatisfaction drives interest in VS (it's a rebellion against her old ways). Aging contributed to interest in VS (makes her proactive and less reactive). VS is ultimately about giving.

Noesis. *Actions*: Took fiddle lessons as an outgrowth of exploring her passion. I think any time I'm asked to do X. Active in faith community to have intergenerational experiences. Respects husband's personal choices (even if she disagrees).

Noema. *Affect/Experiential*: Feeling of control. Don't feel as attached to things and outcomes.

Noema. *Values*: VS group provides validation, chance to be heard. Giving selflessly.

Tim

Noesis. *Reflections*: Simplicity is our natural state. When you rest mind and body you find natural wisdom. Resting mind and body is returning home, and helps you discover your "passion." These activities (most fulfilling ones) preclude many other

expensive and time-wasting activities. Pursued VS after thinking that my life did not suit me well. VS circle helps us author an alternative social script.

Noesis. *Actions*: Stick with activities that I find most fulfilling. Consider purchases well before buying (will it really contribute to my life). "Buy nothing" days.

Noema. *Values*: Time and fulfillment. Favorite activities (exercise, this discussion group, healthful pursuits).

Second-Order Voluntary Simplicity

The overall communication pattern was one of collaborative "barnraising," to borrow an expression from Andrews' book. Comments built on the preceding comments. Each participant explicitly and implicitly supported the others. The interviewer was also a participant in the group, making the boundary much softer than with the committed families he interviewed. It was evident that the group functioned differently from a family or couple, due to the great attention and energy devoted to the group's process. On rare occasions when one member's comments seemed to challenge another member (Claire challenged Jill's statement that she had little energy) the ensuing discussion quickly and implicitly qualified the comment as constructive. When Sam disqualified himself as someone who lives simply, group members promptly rescued him, pointing out the things he does the set him apart from the norm.

In contrast, the other types of interview were focused on the content of the interview over the process. I inferred that the couples, due to a long history together, did not have to devote much energy to the process of the interview, instead focusing on the purpose of the interview.

The content of the interview manifested the "in-training" status of our members, as none of us would say that we live simply, but aspire to work with ourselves. Discussion had heavy influence from our reading of The circle of simplicity by Cecile Andrews (our discussion book). Our comments were particularly strong on the reflective/value dimension while showing fewer items in the action and experience dimensions.

Social Construction: Role of Observer

As discussed above, the interviewer was also a participant in the group (as well as the group's founder). The other participants were therefore, familiar and respectful. Claire is my wife, another important factor, as she felt comfortable taking over at one point (and I was equally comfortable allowing it). The familiarity allowed me more informality than I could otherwise have expected in other interviews.

While each participant elected to be in the group for four months (thus showing intrinsic motivation to be there), my presence in the group interview may have elicited efforts to please me due to my role in coordinating the group.

Member Check

The original group members no longer met together when the interview summary was completed, so I pursued our original members individually. Sam agreed that the summary represented what he said. Claire found her comment that voluntary simplicity is about selfless giving puzzling. She concluded that this comment was an artifact of the interchange with Jill and not representative of her view of simplicity.

Jill was surprised by the amount of stress she placed on finding one's passion. She indicated that she wished she had more passion for something, and that the wish for it

accounted for the focus on that subject. She felt that her life was better characterized by her living up to external expectations.

Interviews Six through Nine

After consulting with my major professor we concluded that the data were becoming redundant. He advised that, from that point on, I listen to audiotaped interviews specifically to discern idiosyncratic data.

This process of interviewing and listening for unique data on the audiotape marked a third, previously unplanned approach to my study suggested by the data. The other two approaches were (1) Ethnographic interviews and analyses described in "On Knowing Voluntary Simplicity," and (2) a simplicity study circle group interview and analysis, also described in the aforementioned chapter.

Interview Six

Jim and Kate (in their late 30's) are peace activists living in the Des Moines area. They have no children. Jim works for the American Friends Service Committee. Kate works for the Iowa Peace Network. Due to time constraints the interview was somewhat shorter than the others. I interviewed them in their home.

Kate was unique in the stress she placed on community building as a central activity of her definition of simplicity. This meant sharing with friends and neighbors (tools and other useful things), dance (Scottish, Irish, square), folk singing, and generally seeking out entertainment that community members can provide for themselves. Jim added that their food-buying club had regular potlucks as well.

Interview Seven

Elizabeth is in her mid forties and lives alone. On the advice of other informants I interviewed childless couples and Elizabeth, as my other informants indicated that the choice to have children or to marry was integral to valuing simplicity. Elizabeth left a professional job as a speech pathologist and downscaled to a clerical position at Iowa State University. I interviewed her in her home in Boone, Iowa.

She lives in a small, older home in need of renovation, which was in process during my visit. Walls were stripped of wallpaper, and paint scraped from windows. The furnishings were spare but adequate for a single occupant.

She defined simplicity in terms of knowing the difference between what you want and what you need, and knowing how much is enough. She needed to feel right about the way she lives, which she defined in terms of being content and living in accordance with the way she sees herself. For example, she had recently ignored a job vacancy in the provost's office that offered better pay for essentially the same job she currently performs. The reason for ignoring the position was that she could not see herself buying power clothes and playing into the status script that many feel is compulsory. Other reasons for living simply are that it is good for the ecology and that it is the ethical thing to do with so many living in poverty.

Elizabeth described herself as a "loner." Despite her description, she was active in many functional social groups. She said that she did not mind being with others if there was something useful to do, but did not like to sit around talking normally. She was distinct in her description of herself as a "loner" or "not one of the in-crowd." Kate

(above) was at the other extreme in her view of community as central to voluntary simplicity.

Interview Eight

Dan and Maeve live on Dan's parents' hog farm. They live in a small building that was originally built to be a garage. All the functions of their living space (except sleeping and toiletry) appeared to happen in one room. Both of them are in their early 50's. Until recently, Dan managed the farm, but when illness killed most of the hogs they were forced to consider other forms of livelihood. At Maeve's insistence Dan set up a business teaching traditional fiddle lessons. Dan's goal is to revive "archaic" entertainment forms, such as people around his farm used to do before the radio arrived in the 1920's. At that time, neighbors would entertain themselves, with those who could play music doing so, and others dancing.

Dan defined voluntary simplicity as voluntary independence. Simplicity confers the "...ability to make as many decisions as possible when I get up in the morning." Dan and Maeve questioned the voluntary part, insofar as the failure of their hog operation left them little choice, yet he is doing something he deeply enjoys, and the couple conserve in order to continue that way. They indicated that they would gladly replace their home (especially Maeve) if their means permitted it. Both Dan and Maeve had faith in their ability to meet the unexpected successfully, and cherished their confidence. This faith in their personal resources was their other reservation about the word "voluntary" when describing simplicity: They each stated that they were not thinking things out much of the time, as the word "voluntary" would suggest.

Interview Nine

Mike and Louise live in the Cambridge area. They are in their mid-forties. Mike has multiple part-time sources of income. He says that teaching flying is his favorite. Louise teaches others how to get off welfare as the co-founder of her agency, drawing on her own past experience with being on welfare. Louise has two children, a son in high school and a daughter in middle school. A different union produced each child during the years that their mother was chemically dependent.

Mike was homeless for a time in the later 1980's. He slept in his car, using a quality sleeping bag to protect him from the winter cold. Mike defined voluntary simplicity as a contentment achieved through the careful attenuation of directions that attention is placed. Having achieved this one can respond and interact with things in one's inner life that one has to pay attention to. Simplicity involves being honest about what one's mind can handle in terms of demands. He states that he makes decisions such that he can respond creatively and constructively to situations. "The more contentment you have, the better you can manage," he said. Mike and Louise have extensive experience with Reevaluation Therapy, founded by Harvey Jackins (also known as co-counseling, a self-help approach to psychotherapy) and their comments often reflected their indebtedness to this method of self-help.

Louise emphasized the theme of living within your means. This indicates one's physical, emotional, spiritual and financial means. In other words voluntary simplicity requires that one live within his or her capacity. Being overextended in any domain upsets the balance.

Mike and Louise were especially unique in their definitions of voluntary simplicity. Their formulations imply that their notions of simplicity are answers to a state of being overwhelmed, with contentment as the outcome of its successful practice.

Combined Analysis: Third-Order Voluntary Simplicity

Introduction

First-order voluntary simplicity consists of constitutive (action and thought) and constituted (experience and value) components of individual reality. Second-order voluntary simplicity is the interactional dance that links individual realities through the interplay of social structure and function. Third-order voluntary simplicity focuses on how these interactional dances combine with other such dances, i.e., voluntary simplicity as social construction, consisting of the interplay of: (1) A perceived context uniting families in a larger community and (2) participation in the perceived context.

Because of the reciprocal nature of social context and social participation, there is no rigid boundary between the two. I have grouped phenomena according to whether they belong to one category more than the other, with the inevitable overlap.

Social Context of Simplicity

Material and Time Conservation

All interviewees recognized that time and money are closely linked, seeking to maximize their use of time by examining their relationship to material consumption. In many cases the interviewees were able to choose less rewarded livelihoods (in monetary terms) in favor of more fulfillment from their livelihoods.

Values/Reflections

Conservation of materials and time allow the interviewees to pursue their passions in life. These passions included:

Environmental and Social Ethics. One reason for conserving materials is to do the right thing for the future of our planet. Less consumption requires less production as well. Less production means that there is less environmental impact. Also, an item that is not purchased is one less item in a landfill some day. Organically produced goods result in less crop runoff, making the extra expense well worth it.

Many interviewees expressed the view that it is unfair to consume indiscriminately when most people on the planet are barely subsisting. Conserving consumption allows some to express their sense of injustice over an inequitable distribution of resources. Others simply had a heartfelt solidarity with individuals they had known in third-world settings.

Community and Boundary. The value of community was explicitly or implicitly implied in all interviews. Some alluded to friendships with many that shared the value of simplicity, while expressing dismay over the wasteful living practiced by individuals outside their community. Community makes simplicity easier to achieve: Tools can be shared, services bartered, garden vegetables can be swapped, planned communities (neighborhoods) are more accessible, making a car less necessary.

Another aspect of community is supporting local economies. Locally owned businesses keep money in the local economy. A dollar spent in such an establishment will continue to benefit the economy. A dollar spent at Wal-Mart will be in another part of the

country tomorrow. A local food-buying club allowed one couple the pleasure of regular potluck dinners with other members.

On a broad scale were the two couples who are peace activists. Being a peace activist was a step toward world community.

Lenora, who indicated that her identification with natural systems is a driving value, expressed the very broadest scale of community. (Thus, the term "voluntary simplicity" suffers the limitation of neglecting the immense complexity of these systems).

Leadership was an expressed or implied value in the context of a simplicity community. Donna acknowledged that she hopes her example will move others into emulating her behavior (a benevolent application of "keeping up with the Jones's"). Community was implied as the larger context of that leadership. Dan expressed his wish to revive "archaic" entertainment. He had learned that people in his local community used to get together in someone's home to play music and dance on Saturday nights. These dances predated the radio, and Dan recognizes the social value of maintaining this tradition.

Elizabeth described herself as a "loner," but valued volunteer work, being available to the children in her neighborhood, taking care of a 95-year-old neighbor, and participating in two book discussion groups. Though she denied the pursuit of community as an intrinsic good, she did much to build community.

Several informants have been approached by the press for stories about simplicity as they live it. Elizabeth, Guy and Noreen, John and Lenora, and Dan and Maeve have all been exposed to the public through press coverage. The function of this exposure has

been an inspiration to individuals who admire simplicity. Participants in the simplicity study circle, for example, have brought some of these articles to the group's attention.

Another aspect of community is boundary, or that which distinguishes one group from another. All participants could name people within their local subculture and people outside of their subculture. Statements of interviewees indicate a subculture, or shared set of meanings that contrasts with mainstream culture, that define membership as a group and define exclusion from the group. Many described experiences of familiarity within their group and some degree of alienation from the "outside." Because of the abstractness of this concept, I will illustrate with several examples.

Mel reported experiences of shock (over a colleague's decision to build a home in the country), depression (that so many people find low-tech or no-tech strange), indicating a sense of boundary that distinguishes one group's values from another's. There was also a sense of embarrassment that he was "showing off" for me, related to my rather feeble participation in voluntary simplicity.

John expressed a sense of "sadness" over the loss of community in today's world. We all move around so much, never establishing a good social fabric. Those who do recognize the value of community grow old without the esteem of younger individuals who might learn from them. He mentioned that he finds time for his friendships and other community events, clearly indicating a group that is an exception to that rule.

Guy reported many aspects of group belonging. Trying to live below the taxation level in order to avoid supporting a war has led to some bartering for services with like-minded people. He hosts faith-based celebrations involving other peace-minded individuals with a bent toward simplicity. Noreen described her anthropological stance in

dealing with mainstream excess, focusing on deferring judgement and looking on as a curious outsider.

Ted and Carol both stated that frugality and conserving single them out in ways that others notice but cannot always define.

Creativity and Agency. I group creativity and agency together, reflecting the pleasures of doing things as one sees fit without having to accept given social scripts. One informant, Maeve, is an artist who became an "artist of living."

Arts serve another community function: Most interviewees had some connection to music and/or dancing. One interviewee articulately described the pleasurable human contact achieved while participating in traditional dancing. One couple described the function of presenting traditional types of entertainment (i.e., Appalachian folk music and dancing) that serve to engage audiences into communities.

Many enjoyed the sense of agency that simplicity allowed them. This sense of agency was intrinsically fulfilling to the participants who valued it (most of the interviewees belong in this category). Lenora, who is an artist by profession, described the "joy" of determining her life context. The ground provided food and livelihood through farming, things can be rebuilt, repainted, constructed, etc. She lived in a house that John built from the ground up. Living simply allows one the time to structure one's life the way one wants.

One couple, Dan and Maeve had problems with the "voluntary" aspect of simplicity because they felt that simplicity had been thrust upon them by the failure of their hog farm. They dealt with the situation by living frugally and designing a new career for Dan, who built up a clientele as a fiddle teacher, musician, and from making

and repairing instruments. Both partners acknowledged the deep satisfaction of getting to do something meaningful for a livelihood. Dan derives pleasure from his work and from resolving a deeply painful predicament forced on him by the advent of factory farming.

Elizabeth denied an abiding interest in artistic expression but acknowledged that the pleasures of gardening and renovating her house afford many of the pleasures that artistic individuals enjoy, but aesthetics were subordinated to the functionality of these activities.

Spirituality. By "spirituality" I intend a broad sense of being a part of something greater than ourselves. In contrast to the sense of "apartness" that agency/artistry imparts, spirituality invokes a sense of "a partness," i.e., being a part of something bigger than ourselves. We are a part of communities, ecosystems, a divine plan, etc. While not all participants would call themselves spiritual, I observed a reverence for such communion that overlapped with, but could not be subsumed into, community. Humility often followed from belonging to a bigger context.

Struggles. All participants faced challenges intrinsic to embracing simplicity. Solidarity with others who share this value also entails alienation from the cultural mainstream. It challenged some to remain nonjudgmental to avoid alienating their friends, family and acquaintances. Noreen and Guy described an anthropological stance that treated the materialistic majority as a culture to be observed, saying "Isn't that interesting?" when faced with perplexing mainstream behavior. They also struggled to deal with the social injustice of the unbalanced distribution of resources in the third world.

Jim described struggles with not being too righteous, with cynicism, with trying to be tolerant of others. Kate had to abandon plans to get a farm when she became arthritic.

Everyone seemed to question whether he or she was doing enough to live their value(s). Excepting the simplicity study circle members, Ted and Carol probably experienced the most dissonance relating to falling short of their aspirations to live simply. (Carol was more vocal about this). Their definition of simplicity involves living a mindful life with plenty of time for home and relationships, and this conflicts with the demands of a dual-career tenure-track lifestyle and two young children to nurture.

Some parents dealt with value conflicts with their children. Guy and Noreen described a confrontation initiated by their son over why he doesn't have more things, like others in his class. Guy explained to him that he was able to spend a lot of time with him because he limited his work. If he worked more, he explained, he would be able to buy more things for his son, but would sacrifice time together in doing so. Posing this to his son, his son indicated that he preferred to have the time with his father.

Ted and Carol found that their children pressured them to buy more things for them. Sean, in particular, expressed an explicit wish for more toys. When questioned, he stated that he estimated an average level of acquisition in his family. He then stated that most children had a lot of things. Evidently, "average" meant that, compared to most children in the world, they were well off, yet he had fewer things than most children in his peer group. Ted dealt with the pressure by offering the option of Sean's spending his own money, if he really wanted something that his parents would not buy for him.

Contextual Participation

The reciprocal dimension of social construction is participation in social context. We participate in a given context based on how we perceive it. We perceive our context based on how we participate in it. As mentioned in my introduction to this section, the reciprocal relationship of social context and social participation necessitates overlap in the classification and description of phenomena. Creativity and agency, for example, clearly imply participation in a social context, albeit they also belong to the domain of values within social context.

Most informants belonged to one or more social groups that functioned to define a context of simplicity. Mel and Donna had multiple community involvements, including a musical band, board membership in a local food buying cooperative, and as shareholders in a CSA (community sponsored agriculture).

Often, members of various groups overlap with other groups. Thus, one might encounter the same individual in several contexts. It is probably no accident that many such activities represent valued but poorly compensated aspects of the local community: Music, farming, organic food distribution, peace activism, dance, art, spirituality, reading groups, volunteering, etc. Participants' discussion of their subcultural status reflects a conscious awareness of constituting social context by participating in these various community functions.

Participation in the economic context is another important factor for most. Working and spending are acts that have broad-ranging consequences for better or worse. Participants were usually selective about how they earned and spent their income. Spending often concerned ecological consequences, as well as whether the spending exceeded limitations imposed by a less-than-lucrative livelihood. Most were concerned with the type of world that their dollars supported. Local economies and fair treatment of workers were significant factors. Earning

money had another consequence important for peace activists: Your tax dollars may support armed conflict. Thus, one of the informant families chose to live below the taxation level.

The simplicity study circle was utilized as an alternative social context. Group members clearly invested significant energy in group building and maintenance. All participants voiced an appreciation of the counter-cultural function of the simplicity circle.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following discussion will begin at the most abstract level and end at the most Concrete level. First, I will present a map of the analyses preceding this chapter modeled on a framework proposed by Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979). The model contains additional embellishments that, hopefully, make it congruent with the epistemology presented in the chapter "On Knowing."

The next section will present reflections on the idea of internalization of action, a piagetian notion that has been recycled through the theories of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991). Specifically, the data suggested imbricated recursive layers involving the categories, reflection/value and action/experience.

I will reflect on the relevance of my study for marital and family therapy next. Originally, I conceived the idea for this study as supportive of therapists who use a systemic framework. I will revisit my original thoughts in that section.

Finally, I will reflect on my role as a participant/observer in this study.

Mapping Results on an Epistemological Framework

Bateson (1972) proposed that the social sciences should mate rigorous observation with a science of pattern. The physical sciences have indubitable truths (laws) that make reliable reference points for continuing scientific activity. Bateson argued that the social sciences have proceeded without such reference points, having failed to find them. Without them, social science rests on the shaky foundation of inductive reasoning.

The problem that Bateson sought to circumscribe in his critique of a science based solely on induction is the proliferation of *explanatory principles*. An explanatory principle is a description that masquerades as an explanation. It is basically an agreement among researchers to stop being curious. Thus the dog in my second chapter, "On Knowing," faced with an assaultive man, could be said to act out of an *instinct for self-preservation*. The explanatory principle, instinct, provides no further illumination of the dog's behavior because it fundamentally asserts that the dog acted by means of a means. Some occult principle, instinct, resides somewhere within the dog, and is all that is necessary to understand its behavior (evidently the man's assault is dispensable too, for if we admit this into the explanation, the dog's behavior becomes rational rather than instinctive).

Good explanation, wrote Bateson, (1979) involves mapping descriptions onto a tautology, or necessary truth, that, in the scientist's best judgement, is indubitable. Explanation should connect descriptions through this tautological framework.

Bateson found a powerful tautological structure in the theory of logical types, and he further refined it in cybernetic theory. Research in the social sciences, according to this view, would involve a kind of pincers maneuver, bringing a priori truth and direct observation together.

In the chapter "On Knowing," I described a process, derived from this Batesonian view, of comparing communications across individuals to arrive at a higher-order perspective on a phenomenon. So, when I compare the statements of two spouses, I arrive at the perspective, *context,* lending a domain of meaning that helps explain the enaction of individual voluntary simplicity (just as the first-order enaction helps explain the

context). The flow of an interview, for example, typically demonstrated a highly collaborative style of interacting. Individuals built on each other's remarks or respectfully allowed for differences. This collaboration sheds insight on each participant's comments, defining a "barnraising" interactional context. An individual describing his esteem for community demonstrates his meaning by interacting with his partner in this fashion.

We can place interactions in one context within a *metacontext* that includes other interactions and individuals both within and beyond the given household. Informants in my study could enumerate friends and acquaintances that shared the value, simplicity. They could also note outsiders that they would define as different according to the value, simplicity. Keeney (1983) classified the interaction of interactions as family "choreography."

Figure 1 diagrams a cybernetic framework for epistemological analysis inspired by Bateson and modified by Keeney (1983). The heading "Order of Recursion" indicates that the diagram deals with behavior, context, and metacontext. The word "recursion" means that causality is bidirectional, circular, or reciprocal. The arrows indicate reciprocal causality. At the level of behavior, we understand a description of simple behavior in terms of its classification, for example, "play." But we also understand the category "play" in terms of the descriptions that constitute it (bowing a fiddle, for example). The first order of recursion belongs to the designation "behavior."

Categories of simple behaviors themselves relate as interaction. Perhaps the fiddle player is with a mandolin player, allowing a classification of their interaction, as harmonizing, dueling, soloing, etc. The second order of recursion belongs to the designation, "context."

There may be other members of the band whose interactions themselves interact with the first two musicians and with each other. Their combined choreographed interactions, coupled with the interaction with an audience, constitute a musical performance in a social context, such as a country-dance, with all the meanings that go with it. The third order of recursion belongs to the designation, "metacontext."

Figure 2 mates the observations of this study with the epistemology of chapter two, "On Knowing." It utilizes the ladder of Bateson's and Keeney's design, replacing some of the causality lines with circles. The circles indicate an additional dimension of recursion, the play of active and passive dimensions of cognition. These dimensions are designated "Noesis and Noema" in a first-order of recursion, "Structure and Function" in the second, and "Perception of Social Context" and "Participation in Social Context" at the third order.

These added dimensions parallel one another as subordinate aspects of their respective orders of recursion. Because each order of recursion marks a different level of abstraction (with a different language belonging to each level), I gave each process a unique terminology, but they are essentially marking active and passive dimensions of the processes they describe.

On the bottom circle of Figure 2, the recursion of Noesis and Noema, constituting act and constituted content, is subordinate to the descriptions of behavior and their classifications.

In the middle circle of Figure 2, the recursive circularity of Structure and Function is subordinate to the recursion of descriptions and classifications of interaction. Structure here is the particular pattern of a given interaction, which is coupled with the function of

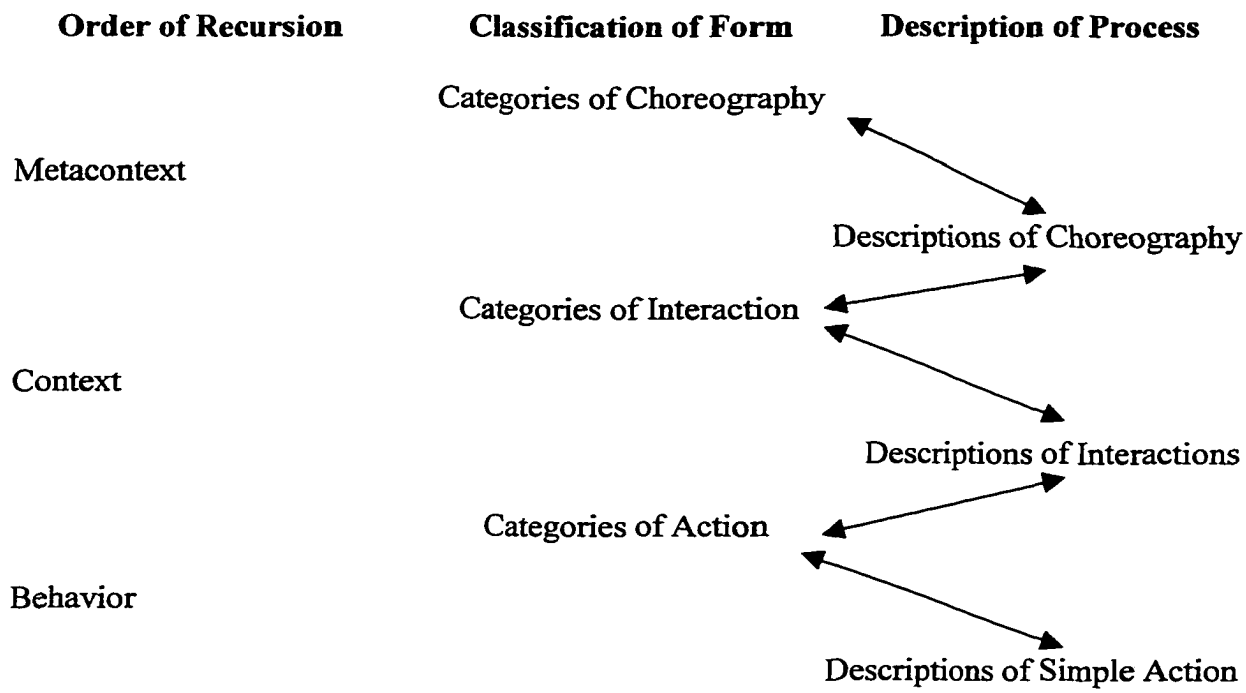

Figure 1. Orders of Epistemological Analysis (Keeney, 1983)

Classification of Form **Classification of Process**

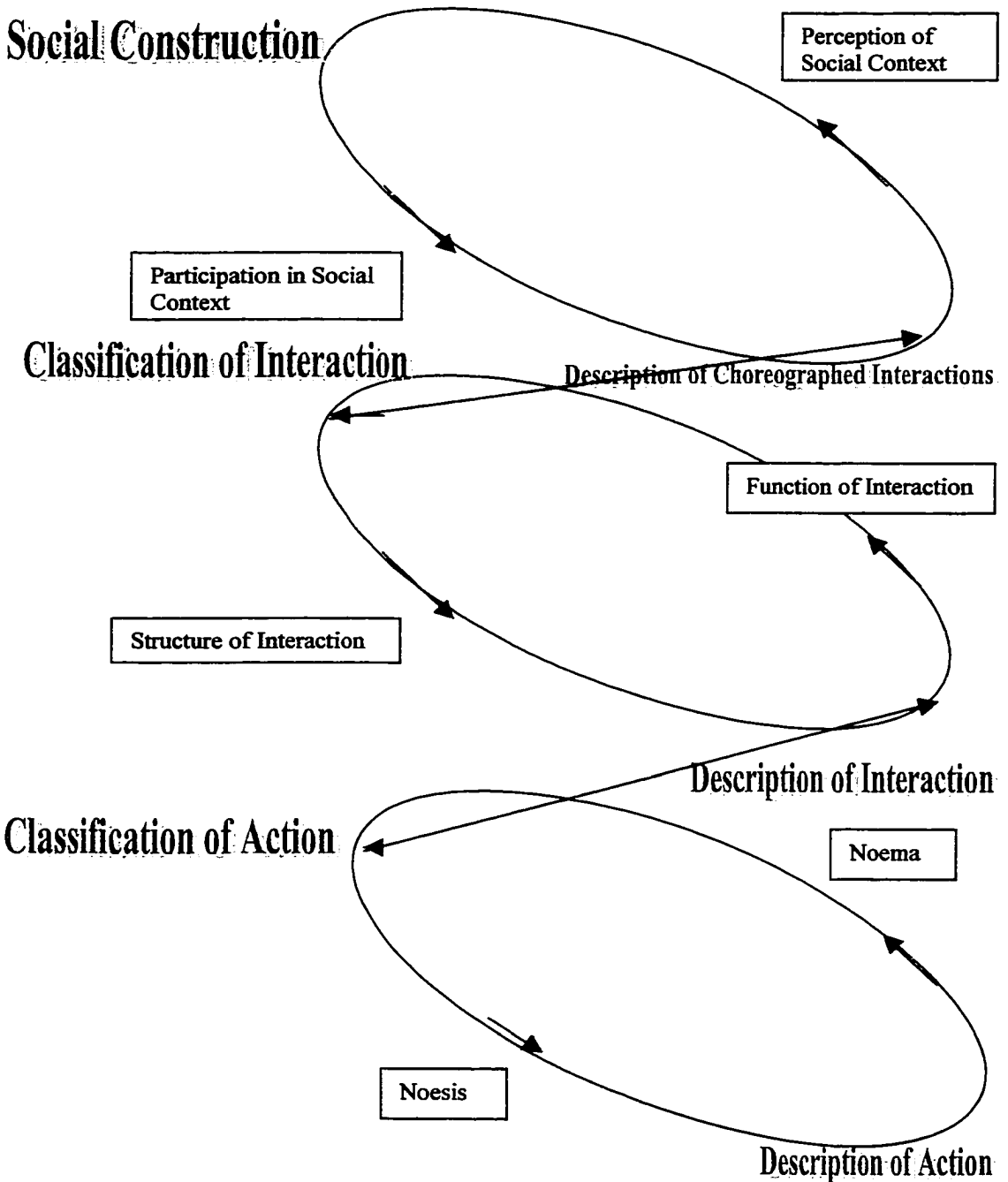

Figure 2. Enacted Orders of Epistemological Analysis

the pattern that explains it.

In the top circle of Figure 2, the circular reciprocity of Perceptions of Social Context and Participation in Social Context is subordinate to the final category, the recursion of Descriptions of Choreographed Interactions and Social Construction. This category reflects the choreography of interactions both within and outside of the family system. It places interaction in a broader subculture.

An Example

First Level: Descriptions and Classifications of Simple Actions

John and Lenora, while building their house, can be viewed from the perspective of each level on Figure 2. Looking at descriptions and classifications of simple actions, each individual works with intent (noesis) and a sense of value and experience (noema). John's intent is to build frugally in a personalized way. He would like a home that is ecologically responsible, using locally available materials, and energy-efficient. Noema might involve satisfaction in authoring one important part of his life, joys and frustrations attending a large project of this nature, and awareness of how he values spending his time in a way that he sees fit.

Standing back from this, the exchange of noesis and noema enacts the circle containing descriptions of the simple actions he performs and the classification of the actions (construction).

Second Level: Descriptions and Classifications of Interaction

Lenora will enact her own circle with both similar and contrasting elements in her enaction. But together they are creating and maintaining a bond within the medium of their project (descriptions and classifications of interaction). Both their actions and their

interactions follow a syntax (structure) that serves to enhance their bond (function). Verbal and nonverbal interactions are obvious foci of this analytic level, but the way that their house erects will reflect their relating to one another in powerful ways. Many construction decisions will subordinate to the overall betterment of their relationship, for example.

Third Level: Social Choreography and Social Construction

Building a home in the context of a relationship has broader functions. Their actions and experiences are set in the context of a greater social choreography that involves the couple's perceptions of the dance and the dance itself. Perhaps friends and/or family help them construct the house, serving to construct community as well. The particular way that this house is built serves to embody subcultural values. John mentioned the role of leadership, and the construction might lead others in a way that is consistent with natural systems (Lenora's identification). They have purchased their materials from locally owned businesses, in order to support local jobs and their vision of small-scale economies. Their behavior embodies a vision of how people can best live in harmony with the natural systems they are a part of. Their house is low-tech enough to accommodate a partial collapse of the infrastructure, such as power failure or loss of natural gas.

In short, as they build a house in the context of a relationship, they perceive and participate in a metacontext (social construction) that includes a perceived subculture and a natural order that supercedes lower levels of analysis. So, as John and Lenora subordinate aspects of home construction to their relationship, they also subordinate their simple actions and interactions to a view of natural systems.

Final Note on Self-Reference

Note that the model (or tautology) allows for the kind of chicken-or-the-egg complexity that characterizes complex systems. The building of a house can subordinate to relationship, but one must begin building with a hole in the ground, however wistfully one longs to start with the roof. Spencer-Brown (1973) has elaborated a fascinating calculus that accommodates these patterns in formal systems. I refer the reader to him to prick our epistemological bubble. One of the high points for me was his importation of the domain of imaginary values into logic to augment the existing values, "true" and "false."

I will not attempt to explicate the full significance of self-referential logic here, but I wish to make the point that this dissertation aims to embody self-reference in its construction. The title breaks into two segments: "Voluntary simplicity:" and "An enacted reality." "Voluntary simplicity" corresponds to noema, or passive meaning, and "enacted reality" indicates the noetic, or active, part of cognition. Careful analysis reveals that each expression is a facet of one holism. This document is equally directed at voluntary simplicity and enaction, as they are inseparable.

Internalization

Varela et al. (1991) agreed with the piagetian notion that cognition begins with a sensorimotor loop. The development of our mental world begins with behavior and experience becoming linked. As sensorimotor loops are repeated many times there is an eventual internalization from the overt loop into symbolic process. As analysis progressed on successive interviews I noted that first-order analysis suggested a

condensation of data into noesis and noema, where noesis could be subdivided into reflection and action. Noema could be subdivided into values and experience/affect.

Further analysis suggests that reflection/value be treated as one reciprocal identity while action/experience/affect (note larger boldface slash after "action") be treated as another.

There is a clear parallel between the two recursive complementarities. The action/experience/affect resembles the sensorimotor loop, while reflection/value belongs to the category of internalized cognition.

This observation suggests that the process of embracing the value, simplicity, might begin with acting out and experiencing various "manifestations" of simplicity, and gradually coming to a reflective, value oriented status. During the interview process, the "committed" adherents were "different" from the members of the simplicity study circle. Despite the willingness of study circle members to do some of the things that the "committed" were doing, we also fell short of the mark more often than we hit it. We might recycle and turn the thermostat down, but also buy unnecessary electronic gadgets and allow a great deal of time and space clutter. This was not the case with other interviewees.

Another difference between the two groups centered on social connection. The majority of the "committed" individuals were well-networked with other individuals who shared important aspects of a way of life. Perhaps they shared tools, social events, political activism, humanitarian activity, or spirituality. This social construction of simplicity is a well-developed practice among the majority of committed practitioners.

The language of these individuals supported this observation, as there are many explicit and implicit references manifesting connectedness to others.

This was not the case among simplicity study circle participants. We had no close friends who lived simply, nor a developed social network that constructed the subculture observed in the ethnographic interviewees. Our language contained briefer references to community and these references were few in number.

The notion of internalization would help explain the observed difference between groups. Voluntary simplicity, as demonstrated by the "committed" may reflect long practice, either through behavior learned from parents (an observation that John and Lenora made multiple times), or coming to a perception that practicing simplicity might be a good idea, (such as through keeping abreast of ecological and economic problems, for example). There may be any number of additional explanations, but the point is that, through persistent practice, there might come a qualitative shift wherein simplicity becomes "hard-wired" into one's cognitive categories, similar to the speculated internalization of the sensorimotor loop.

Following up on the previous section, if practice is the key to embodied simplicity, then one might expect deeper mastery with practice on multiple levels of emergence. Individual enaction, dyadic interaction, and social construction combined would have a much deeper integration than the sum of their parts. My data corroborates this speculation in that the individuals who most embodied simplicity described "practices" on multiple levels.

These considerations prompt me to theorize that simplicity begins as a way of life that provides an excellent basis for philosophizing in the reflective domain. In other

words, the practice comes first; the reflection develops later (and is not essential). One could not easily see an individual squandering her personal and material resources in aimless directions and say that she lives simply, however articulate her praise of voluntary simplicity. Conversely, some individuals live simply with little philosophical immersion. Dan and Maeve exemplify this possibility. They focused on their freedom to live in the way they preferred.

Herein, I think, is the crux of the difference between simplicity study circle participants and the more committed people in this study. Albeit a philosophical stance is not necessarily a hindrance to simplicity, lack of practice is such a hindrance. The philosophical committed had a developed circularity between the reflective/value dimension and the action/experience dimension (which reflected long practice). The study circle members lacked this excellent foundation in the action/experience dimension.

The game of chess makes an analogy with the learning curve of simplicity. The moves of the game reflect relatively unexamined commitments for beginners. Beginners "squander" many moves in ignorance of the complex context of the game, with costly results. The advanced player, through much practice and theoretical study, can conceptualize each move in a broad context. Their moves and their conceptualizations are congruent with the goals of the game.

Chess is a game that builds decision-making skills. Similarly, the advanced practice of voluntary simplicity seems to involve advanced decision-making, committing resources of time and materials where it counts, and abiding simply the rest of the time.

Simplicity and Therapy

Voluntary simplicity means that one pursues the things that matter to you and clear away whatever stands in the way. All participants in the study expressed their esteem for relationships of various kinds. Many expressed it explicitly, while others expressed it implicitly.

When marriage and family fail the failure often belongs to the failures of society as well. We have become exceedingly complex. Dual income families are normal today. Long workweeks have also become expected. We become trapped in the work-and-spend cycle. We are also often tied to the position and role that compensate us the most, for the same reasons.

When so many have so little time for their families and friends, the social fabric deteriorates. My experience as a marriage and family therapist has led me to believe that this is the social context for many of the clinical complaints that therapists encounter. When the social fabric is threadbare, people seek connection in perverse ways. Status and prestige become substituted for intimacy. Alienation becomes common. By the time a problem has entered the clinical context the personal resources of the clients are often extremely low. A sixty-hour a week commitment to the job leaves very little for solving problems in a failing marriage or a troubled child.

Experience, both as a therapist and as the researcher of this very study, leads me to hypothesize that we need to experience quiescent states of mind and body, and we need to do it regularly. I suspect that many difficult problems might become workable if we were not so estranged from that same quiescence. Would we go on the way that we do if we could stand back from our lives on a regular basis? When we are on our deathbeds,

will we think that we made the best use of our time today? Cluttered time and cluttered minds go hand in hand.

I hope that this study contributes to a body of clinical wisdom that clinicians can use. Simplicity study circles are proliferating, creating a valuable community resource for therapists. It is difficult to fall out of step with the prevailing cultural context unless you have an alternative social context that will validate alternative thinking. Simplicity circles provide such a context.

The therapist who has led the "examined life" can also play the countercultural role (similar to members of a simplicity study circle), helping the client discover his or her passion and seeking to eliminate what stands in the way. This assumes that the therapist has already practiced simplicity long enough to internalize it as a value.

Practical Applications for Marriage and Family Therapy and Financial Counseling

Given my earlier analysis of how the work-and-spend cycle undermines our social fabric, it follows that the professional helper would focus on ways to wean his or her clients from the treadmill. The central exercises of Dominguez and Robin's (1992) Your money or your life would be invaluable in this context. The foundation of this approach is to develop financial acumen by keeping meticulous records of one's income and expenses.

Using these detailed records the client must determine some key figures. First, what is your true income? This task has three stages. First, the client must calculate all expenses related to having a job. Perhaps a car became necessary in order to commute to this job. (I can testify about this. My internship in Des Moines required almost 100 miles of commuting each day. At the end of the internship, the car's engine was losing

compression. I earned $19,000 from my internship. I spent $19,400 for a new car.) Other expenses might involve costuming, coifing, food, possible medical bills, "consolation" expenses related to compensating oneself for the stresses of a job (expensive entertainment, dining, vacations, luxury purchases, etc.). Therapy bills, excessive drinking, smoking, and other coping mechanisms might add further expense to a job.

A second stage of calculating one's true income involves calculating the true hours of one's job. If the client only has enough energy to hold the remote control after a workday, then that time could be called "job-related." Time commuting and performing other tasks related to having a job should also be considered time on the job.

In the third stage of calculating one's true income, the client subtracts the cost of her job from her yearly salary, and divides that figure into her adjusted total yearly work hours to get a "true" hourly wage. She now has a realistic figure for starting the next task.

The second task requires that the client examine a month's expenses to answer a key question: Was each expense worth the time she traded for the means to purchase the thing or service in question? If the answer is "yes" she might want to pay out even more in that direction in the future. If the answer is "no" she should consider cutting expenses in that category (or even eliminating them). A third possibility is that the expense is about right as it is.

Continued practice of these tasks will develop a sharp reckoning of what one's dollar and time are worth. The client will learn to value time and money, and will assess how money relates to fulfillment more precisely. This acquired acumen is a powerful tool for thinking about how to wean from the work-and-spend treadmill. Overall, the clients' expenses will start to decrease, with consequent increases in freedom. Pleasure arising

from this creates a self-perpetuating process, where the clients begin to envision a reengineered life. Perhaps one partner can now stay home with the children. Perhaps there is a viable job "downshift" that could support marriage and family better. Perhaps the clients will discover that they are only five years away from financial independence. Our clients can probably think of more possibilities than we can!

Clinical Anthropology

Another application of this research is the use of inquiry focused on the circularity of noesis and noema. Careful comparison could assist the clinician in summoning compassion for the client, and a better understanding of what it is like to be the client and see things his way. Seasoned clinicians can attest to the importance of a basic human connection for professional helpers. Insights garnered from this type of inquiry could also assist in formulating and implementing a treatment plan.

Professional Survival

Managed care has placed stresses on today's professionals that most could not imagine twenty years ago. Productivity expectations are as high as 90% in some parts of the country. Perhaps the total quality management perspective is helpful in an automobile factory, but the same standards applied in mental health often result in therapist impairment.

Today's therapist, finding herself on a burnout track, might consider the benefits of voluntary simplicity. It would allow many to either work fewer hours or to take advantage of youth to achieve financial independence at an early age (before she loses the stamina to cope with high productivity requirements). The enhanced instrumentality this gives the therapist is likely to rebound in the client's favor.

Limitations and Future Studies

The study reflects the positions of networked individuals, couples, and families in the rural Midwest (and, in one case, a small midwestern city). Proximity to a large university applied to all but Don and Marie, who traveled to the Iowa State University area frequently. Two obvious limitations present themselves: (1) the need to track similar informants in other parts of the country, living in different contexts, and (2) the need for a longitudinal study.

Another possible study would seek to implement knowledge gleaned from my informants with others who would benefit from the instrumentality that the above practitioners seem to enjoy as a whole.

On Being a Participant Observer

By starting a simplicity study circle I hoped to immerse myself in my topic. I intended to study simplicity from outside and inside. The experience of studying reminded me of Noreen's statement, "Living simply is not simple." I met many generous people who invited me into their households, fed me (sometimes), and gave up an afternoon or evening of their time for this study. They allowed me time for member checks on subsequent occasions. I found that I admired my informants for having the wisdom to live their lives as they saw fit. I may not choose to do things the same way that any one person did, but I admired them for living in a way that makes sense for them.

I gained further respect for my informants when I started studying with the simplicity circle. It is one thing to reflect that an idea is good. It is another to "walk the talk." Your spouse might not value the same notions of simplicity that you do. Some acquisitions seem incredibly alluring, however nonessential they might be. For example, I

asked myself, "Does it make sense to follow a health regimen with a substantial sum going out for food supplements if it might avoid costly medical bills later?" I doubted that many of my informants reached the same conclusion that I did. Even if they did reach the same conclusion, they often lacked the means to do so. I imagined that, had I asked, I might have heard that not having my bills freed them, giving them more life in their years, if not years in their lives.

My informants convinced me that some expenditures are worth it despite a higher price tag. The price of organic food, for example, ends up being a lot cheaper than the costs to our health and environment incurred through nonsustainable agriculture. The extra dollars spent in locally owned businesses continued to benefit the community after I spent them.

I recalled where my initial enthusiasm for simplicity came from and enrolled in a five-year course in advanced meditation, taught by a meditation master. The two-hour per day meditation commitment was substantial, but it was an indispensable way for me to "pick up the trail" again. Enjoying the benefits of planned quiescence, I could not imagine how our political and corporate leaders could rule wisely when their time is so structured. Perhaps meditation is not essential for everyone, but I suspect that discretionary time is. My informants clearly valued their time, and sought to use it optimally.

My reaction to my own attempts to embrace simplicity parallels the observation that we internalize it as a practice. There are many false notes in my practice, but I go on practicing. I still tend to love high tech. I'm not very handy when things break. The decision to live in a small town meant that we must depend on our cars, and that we

would require two cars. Getting two spouses to agree on what is enough for a child is anything but simple.

The list of challenges and failings seems insurmountable. Yet I feel incredibly blessed with fulfilling things to do, and think that this is the core of what my informants have told me. When you come to value your time, you are motivated to protect it from erosion. When you sell your time for money, you will tend to expect fair compensation for it, because you understand that you are giving up something priceless in order to earn a price.

Summary

This chapter maps the research and epistemology presented in previous chapters onto a graphic.

Second, it presents a frame to explain two levels of enaction: (1) Action/experience and (2) reflection/value, hypothesizing that number (2) reflects a history of number (1). This hypothesis would be consistent with the observation that voluntary simplicity involves a great deal of practice to achieve.

The relevance of simplicity to therapy followed. Therapists can use simplicity study circles as a community resource, and invoke principles of simple living in therapy.

Finally, I discussed my personal involvement with voluntary simplicity.

I count the hours I spent on this project as a great privilege. It was extremely gratifying to meet the individuals who served as informants. Just as they have benefited me, I hope this research will benefit others.

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